

A vibrant anime-style illustration featuring Aqua, a character with long blue hair and a blue dress, holding a large silver sword. She is surrounded by four smaller characters: a blonde girl, a pink-haired girl, a boy, and a dark-haired girl. The background is white with some decorative orange and pink patterns.

KONOSUBA: GOD'S BLESSING ^{ON THIS} WONDERFUL WORLD! FANTASTIC DAYS

Hirukuma

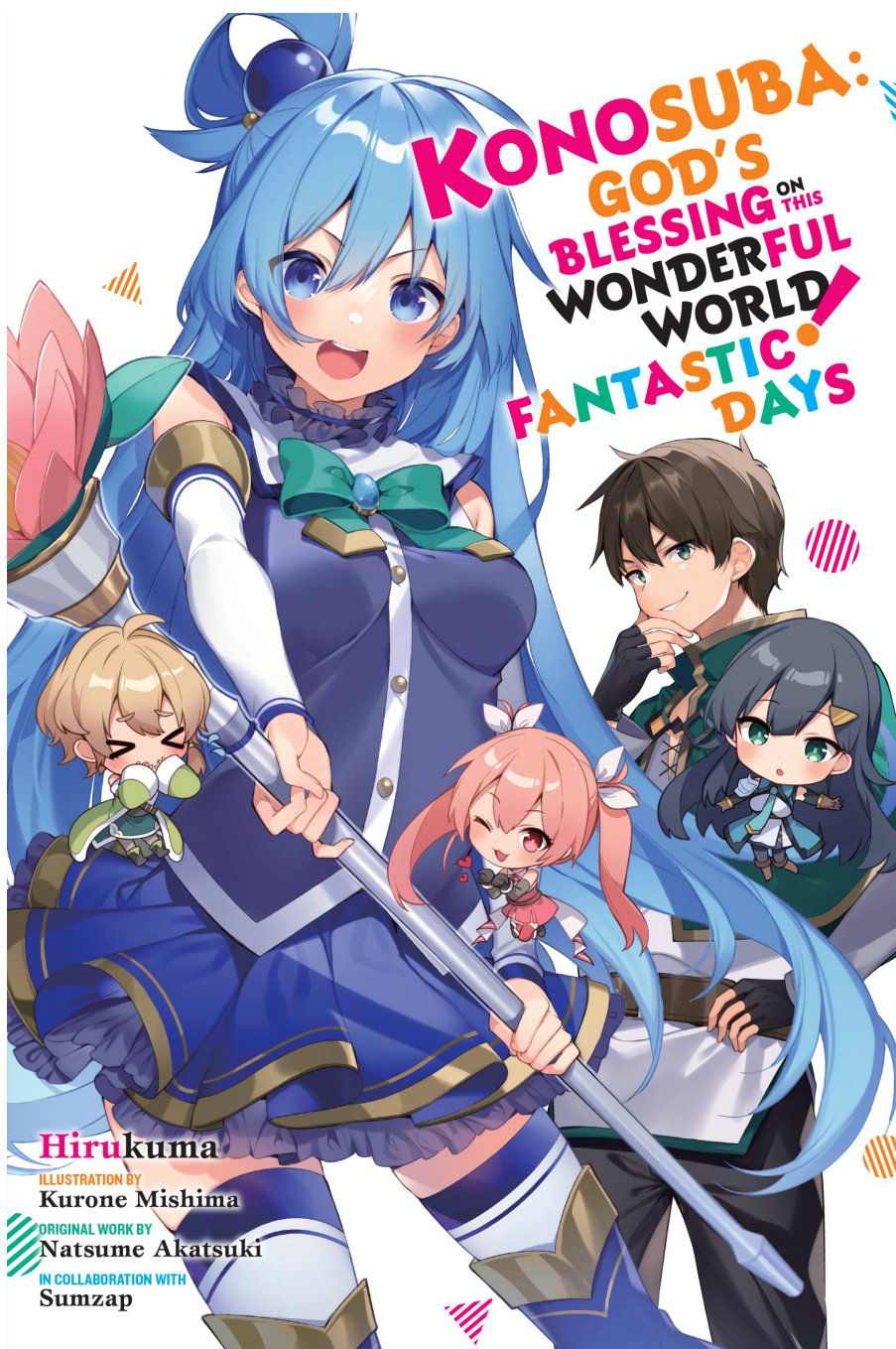
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Natsume Akatsuki

IN COLLABORATION WITH
Sumzap



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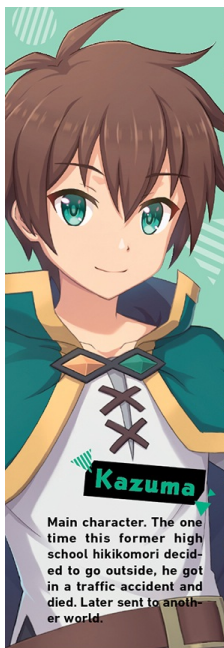
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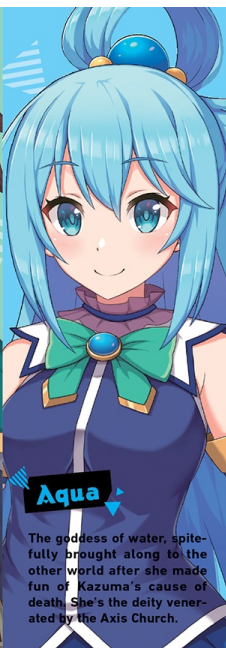
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Kazuma

Main character. The one time this former high school hikikomori decided to go outside, he got in a traffic accident and died. Later sent to another world.



Aqua

The goddess of water, spitefully brought along to the other world after she made fun of Kazuma's cause of death. She's the deity venerated by the Axis Church.



Megumin

An Arch-wizard of the Crimson Magic Clan. Mastering Explosion, the most powerful of magic spells, gives her life purpose. Explosion is the only spell she uses—or knows.



Darkness

Daughter of an important noble family and a serious masochist. Also adventurer/knight. Her real name is Lalatina Ford Dustiness, and her current biggest concern is her ripped abs. She's also the chief of sex appeal around here.

The Axel Hearts



Lia

Leader of the dancing group the Axel Hearts, she's a talented singer—and spear wielder. She's diligent and hard-working, but she's not without her shortcomings. Particularly cherishes her stuffed toy, Konjiru.



Cielo

A member of the Axel Hearts, she's an Arch-priest and especially skilled at dancing. Withdrawn and not very flexible, a pathological fear of men causes her to hit first and ask questions later anytime one touches her.



Erika

A member of the Axel Hearts, she's a Ranger—the cutest Ranger around! She might be a little pushy about what she wants, but a bit of flattery goes a long way to getting her on your side.





**KONOSUBA:
GOD'S BLESSING
ON THIS
WONDERFUL WORLD
FANTASTIC DAYS •**

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NEW YORK

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Konosuba: God's Blessing on This Wonderful World!
FANTASTIC DAYS

HIRUKUMA

Translation by Kevin Steinbach

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KONO SUBARASHII SEKAI NI SHUKUFUKU WO! FANTASTIC DAYS

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Contents

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

Prologue

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Epilogue

Afterword

Yen Newsletter

KONOSUBA: GOD'S BLESSING WONDERFUL FANTASTIC DAYS

CONTENTS



Prologue

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Epilogue



Afterword



Prologue

I'd made up my mind: I was going to lounge around all day today. Which was exactly what I was doing, hanging out in my mansion and savoring the slovenly life, when who should appear but Megumin, dressed in a pointy hat and black outfit that just screamed *I'm a witch!*

"Kazuma, let us go on a quest!" she said.

"Yeah, not today," I replied.

"That's what you said yesterday. And the day before yesterday and the day before that! You've been completely cooped up in this house. When exactly *will* you be ready to go on a quest?" This blatant attempt to get a rise out of me came from a golden-haired knight, Darkness. At least she was looking her part today.

"Well, quests are dangerous, y'know? I don't wanna, like, get hurt. Especially when I don't *need* to go on quests. My cup overfloweth as it is!"

What had I done to wind up with such workaholic party members? As far as I was concerned, sleeping until noon, never working, and eating only the best food was as good as life got.

"Such laziness! Aqua, say something to him!" Megumin exclaimed.

"Sorry, no. I can't rebuke Kazuma when he hasn't said anything wrong. I agree, we've been working a little too hard lately. We should baby ourselves! On which note, I want some of that special-reserve bubbly..."

Aqua had blue hair and wore blue clothes. If she stayed completely still and silent, she would look like she'd sprung right out of a painting of a beautiful woman. And at the moment, she was backing me up. Well said, Aqua! This was what came of knowing someone a long time. We were so in step, so on the same page.

"Is this how you act in the middle of the day? Can you really live with yourselves like this?" Darkness said, clearly troubled. But at that moment, we heard the emergency siren. "Wait, what's that?!"

"*Urgent quest! Urgent quest! All adventurers, please report to the town gate immediately!*" I recognized the announcer's voice; it belonged to the cute girl who worked the front desk at the guild.

"Haven't had one of those emergency announcements in a while," Darkness said. "Gosh, that really takes me back."

“This is no time for fond recollections! We must hurry!” Megumin said and started shoving me. I’ve gotta be honest: It was hard to work up any enthusiasm to go out there. Like I said, I’d made up my mind—it was going to be just me and the couch all day today. I couldn’t let a simple emergency quest undermine my free will!

“You guys go on ahead,” I said. “Me, I’m not in the physical shape to lift anything heavier than a pair of chopsticks.”

“Please! You are making yourself sound like some overindulged aristocrat! Just shut up and go with me!”

Megumin was bent on getting me out of the house no matter how much I resisted. I felt like hassling her about it at least a *little* more, but then I saw Darkness in the background getting a rope. “Hey... What are you planning to do with that? I’m not like you, Darkness—I’m not into that sort of thing!”

“If you won’t move, then you leave us no option but to use force,” she said, although she said it with a slight flush in her cheeks. What, was she *happy* about this?

“Force, huh? Okay, how about I tie you up with that rope, nice and tight? How’s that for force?”

“Y-you won’t tempt me that easily!” The fact that she knew it was a temptation meant she’d already lost our little game.



“Yeah, I will. I’m pretty sure of it. Now hand me that rope and turn around.”

“I warn you not to underestimate me! But... If you insist, I’m willing enough...”

She talked a good game, but her actions spoke louder than her words. She turned around and put her hands behind her back so it would be easy to tie her up.

“What are you doing, Darkness?!” Megumin exclaimed. “This is no time for your stupid games! We are going!”

Chapter One

1

The area around the town gate was already packed when we got there. It looked like every adventurer in Axel had shown up. I recognized a few faces. Like the Goldilocked, red-eyed punk Dust—and Rin, his wizard slash babysitter. Their party members Taylor and Keith were with them, too.

“All riiiiight! I’ll finally have some cash to gamble with!” Dust said.

“You’d better pay back what you owe me first!” Rin snapped.

“Pfft. Yeah! When I feel like it!”

Dust never seemed to have enough money. But hey, I wasn’t one to judge. I’d been in his shoes back in the day. Not now, though. Now I had a neat little nest egg that ensured there was no need for me to scratch and scabble for a living.

“Huh! They’re awfully early this year,” grumbled a middle-aged guy with a craggy face and a mohawk, looking into the distance. Following his gaze, you could see countless cabbages flying toward us. That’s right: the round green vegetable. I should have been shocked... right? Frankly, it was kind of scary to realize I was so used to ridiculous stuff like this that it didn’t even faze me anymore.

“Cabbages?” I said. “Hey, I thought they showed up in autumn? It’s still spring!” What I was saying sounded crazy to my own ears, but in this world, no one batted an eye.

“Huh! You don’t know about them, Kazuma? Those are spring cabbages. They’re planted in fall and harvested in spring. They’re renowned for being especially delicious! We can eat them ourselves for a snack, or we can sell them for a tidy profit. So let’s get our harvest on!” Aqua said, flinging herself toward the oncoming vegetables. As I watched her go, all I could do was heave a sigh.

2

“Save me, Kazumaaaaa! These cabbages seem way more violent than the last ones!”

Well, I could have seen this coming. As I watched Aqua run

around screaming, pursued by leafy greens, I sighed again. Luna, a guild receptionist and (as all of us agreed) certifiable cutie, was standing with me and watching the battle from a safe distance. "Spring cabbages have a reputation for being extremely lively and energetic! They say that's what makes them so tasty!" She sounded pretty happy about it. Maybe she liked cabbage.

"Grr... If they would just settle in one place, I could give them a taste of my explosion," Megumin said. Full of great ideas, as always. I was watching everyone else fight for their lives against the vegetables, occasionally using Steal to grab myself a cabbage. Let no one say I wasn't doing my part.

Then I started to hear the voices of panicked adventurers.

"Guys, this is terrible! The performing troupe that was supposed to get back today... There's no sign of their wagon!"

"You think they were attacked by cabbages? Anyway, goin' to help 'em would mean getting through that swarm..."

The fact that they were so panicked about, you know, cabbages kind of took the tension out of the moment, but it definitely sounded like bad news. *Not my problem, though. I'm sure if I just wait, some do-gooder will help them.*

"Understood! We can't abandon them! We'll go look for them. I'll act as a shield to absorb the cabbages' attacks!" This highly enthusiastic suggestion came from none other than Darkness. Like I said, she talked a good game.

"Is it just me, or do you sound happy about that idea?" I said.

"...Do not," she said. So why was she smiling?!

I tried to stop her. There was no reason for us to go out of our way to put ourselves in danger. But Darkness was already running off, launching herself into the swarm of vegetables.

"That moron...! Fine, let's go!" I said. It wasn't like she was going to die if I didn't do anything. Her defensive abilities were the one thing about her you could rely on. But I knew her attacks couldn't hit, so even if she did go to rescue those people, she'd just end up being worked over by cabbages forever. (I chose to ignore the fact that that might be exactly what she wanted.)

As Darkness waded through the cabbages, arms open wide, they came at her from every direction. "*Hff! Hff!* The cabbages' attacks are especially brutal today! Those heavy, *hard* blows... I can't stand it!"

It looked to me like she had defense to spare, actually. We could afford to leave her on her own for a while. We were committed now; I decided to prioritize dealing with the missing wagon. Maybe they'd give me a little reward as thanks.

"Kazuma, look! I see a wagon!" Megumin called. A small, rotund guy that I took to be the driver was lying curled up on the ground

near the cart.

“Hey, you there!” I shouted. “Are you alive?!”

The guy turned toward me, and I saw his expression of fear soften. “Yes, somehow. But the horse ran off...”

“Did you have any other passengers?” Aqua asked as she healed the man’s wounds.

“Yes, some dancers, but they escaped. I was worried about the cargo...”

Dancers? Well, they had said something about a performing troupe.

“Yeah, well, you and your precious cargo are both done for if you stick around here. Come with us!” I said. Then I started shouting instructions. “Darkness! We’ll get this guy somewhere safe! You just keep those cabbages off us!”

She looked at me, shocked. “A-all the damage I’ve taken, yet you command me to continue to act as a wall for you?! Heh-heh-heh... That’s perfect! Use me as your shield! Every day! All the time!” She flung her arms wide again, blushing with joy as the cabbages came at her.

“Now! While Darkness is distracting the cabbages with her Decoy skill!” Aqua called.

“This way, Pops! You’re gonna have to leave the cart!” I said.

“Y-yes... But my cargo...” Was he still whining about that? I grabbed his hand and dragged him away.

“Kazuma! I am ready to use Explosion at any time!” Megumin called. Perfect timing.

“I see those vegetables are finally all in one place. So how about you blow up something and get us out of here? Go for it, Megumin! Just don’t let the cart get caught up in the blast!”

“My name is Megumin. Foremost magic user of the Crimson Magic Clan and master of Explosion!” she started chanting.

Oops! I remembered something else I’d better say. “Darkness, get out of there before you get fried!”

“I know! Just a little longer... Just a little longer...!”

“Did one of those cabbages hit you in the head?! Get over here, already!” Sturdy or not, even Darkness would be in danger from a direct hit from Megumin’s explosion magic. Especially with how much stronger Megumin had gotten recently.

“Heh! Heh! Heh! Behold my power! *Exploooooosion!*”

The blast of magic wiped out the cabbage swarm—and annihilated the wagon.

“What the hell are you doing?! That was the cart! The one I told you *not* to blow up!”

“The word *restraint* is not in the Crimson Magic Clan’s dictionary!

Hmph! A fine explosion if there ever was one!”

The little brat! Maybe I should just leave her lying there on the ground and go home.

I heard a voice trembling with suppressed rage say, “Wh-what have you *done*?” I turned slowly to find the driver, shaking just like his voice.

“Y-yeah, sorry about that,” I said. “But hey, at least you’re okay. That’s what counts, right?”

I was hoping to talk him down a bit, you know, end this peacefully. But he exclaimed, “Don’t be ridiculous! You don’t know what that wagon was carrying!”

3

When it was all over, I dragged myself to the tavern, feeling like my body was made of lead. We asked the waitress for some bubbly, then collapsed into our seats.

“I can’t believe this,” I groaned. “That wagon was carrying a *performing troupe*! So why...?”

“I never dreamed it would have been full of a tribute to the nobility,” Aqua agreed from beside me. “Why would a bunch of performers take on a transportation job anyway?!” She didn’t try to hide her frustration.

“I agree completely. If I’d known they had such cargo aboard, I would never have unleashed my magic,” said Megumin. She and Darkness were standing across from me. They were late.

“No. You definitely still would’ve,” I said.

“N-not at all!” she protested, but her brimming eyes and fidgety look said otherwise.

“And now we owe four hundred fifty million eris in compensation... It’s impossible! How the hell am I supposed to come up with that kind of money?!” I’d finally kissed the debt-ridden life good-bye! Happiness had been within my grasp, and now it was slipping away, back into a sea of red ink! I just wanted a break. Didn’t they know how hard I’d worked to repay the last huge bill?!

“I guess our only choice is to take on some high-risk, high-reward quests. Like defeating another general of the Demon King!” Aqua said.

“High risk? Count me out. Could we even handle a quest like that on our own? If we’re going to do something really dangerous, I think we should put out a request for party members at the guild...”

“Excuse me... Sorry... Do you have a second?” interrupted a girl with black hair.

“Hmm?”

Her lustrous locks, tied up with a golden hair band, were the first

thing I noticed about her. She was slim and looked like an adventurer, but I didn't remember ever having seen her around the guild.

"I heard you talking," she said. "You're looking to take on a difficult quest?"

"Uh, we weren't exactly *looking*..." I said.

"Um, if you don't mind... Do you think you could let us come along? As part of your party?" Another girl popped out from behind the first. She had golden hair cut into a sort of boyish do. So did this "us" business mean they were adventuring buddies?

"Let us? They should be begging us to join them! They must be thrilled to be able to go on a quest with the likes of us!" A third interloper emerged in the form of a girl with striking pink pigtails. Somehow, her attitude didn't rub me the wrong way—even if I did think maybe she was playing it up a bit too much.

But I, for one, knew that three pretty girls appearing out of nowhere was a red flag—a warning sign for *something*.

"I don't *think* we'll get in your way... Can't we come?" asked the black-haired girl, who seemed to be their leader. She took a step toward me.

"We did say we were going to look for party members. But who are you, exactly?" Aqua asked. It was a fair question. A guy needed a few minutes to compose himself before he dealt with a request like this.

The three girls looked at one another, nodded, then turned back to us. "You're right. We didn't introduce ourselves. We're a troupe of dancers! We travel around, but Axel's our home base, and—"

"Look, they didn't ask for your life story. Let's just give 'em the ole self-intro!" Pink Pigtails interrupted.

"Oh, u-um... I'm a little embarrassed, but I'll give it my best shot!"

That was some good enthusiasm, but what was she going to give her best shot to?

"The people asked about me! And Cielo gives the people what they want!" The girl who called herself Cielo bent at the waist like she was giving a polite bow and put her hand over her mouth.

"Sh-she's cool on the outside and hot on the inside! Lia's here to take your breath away!" On the "away," the girl with black hair winked...awkwardly. In fact, her face was beet red.

By process of elimination, that meant the pink-haired girl must be next.

"We're the world's most comely collection of cuties! Loveliness one thousand percent! I'm Erika!" She twirled in place and gave us a big smile. She didn't look shy in the least and was clearly happy to be the star of the show, but...yikes.

The three of them gave us a look and lined up together. ""A

group of dancers this delightful only comes along once every thousand years! We're the Axel Hearts!""""

They weren't quite in time with one another, but they all struck poses at the end. Gosh, what was this emotion I was feeling? It was equal parts secondhand embarrassment and...nostalgia? I'd seen something a lot like this back in Japan...

"That's a pretty good intro. We can't let them beat us at the introduction game, can we?" Aqua said. I didn't know why she seemed so into this.

"Hoh! Poses and everything, huh? I think we need something pretty cool to match this," said Megumin.

"You want me to do that in front of all these people?! You want a noble like me to expose herself in such a degrading way? It's enough to make my skin crawl with humiliation...and it's not bad," Darkness said. What was with these people? Why did they want to do this?

"Look, just stop, okay? Girls, I'm Kazuma Sato. This is Aqua here beside me, and those two are Darkness and Megumin."

"You're all dancers? No wonder you're so cute," Aqua said.

"Cute? Did you just say we're cute?!" Erika demanded, leaning toward Aqua with a look of pure joy.

"Um, yeah? I did. So what?"



“Ooooh, say it again!” She pointed a finger squarely at me. “And then tell us how overjoyed you are that three such sweet, cute, lovable young ladies are joining your party!” She was practically squirming with excitement. Was it just me, or was this girl a little *too* thrilled to be called cute? I made a mental note to keep my distance.

“Slow down, Erika! What a way to talk to people we’ve just met!” Cielo groaned.

Lia wasn’t deterred. “So how about it? Ready to let us join your party?”

“Absolutely not!” I snapped. “Three dancing girls aren’t going to do us any good in a fight! I’d take three powerful, advanced-class bruisers if I had my pick!”

I felt no hesitation and no need to give them another second to explain themselves. From the moment they’d introduced themselves, they’d smelled like nothing but trouble to me. I had enough experience by now to tell when a pretty face hid a desperately deranged interior.

“D-dancing is just our job,” said Lia. “We have legitimate adventurer classes, too, you know! I’m a Lancer—a spear user! I think I know a thing or two about attacking. And Erika here—”

“I’m an Army Ranger,” she volunteered. “I’m not just a cutie-pie—I also have lots of skills that’ll come in helpful on any quest!”

“A-and I’m an Arch-priest. I support you with healing spells from behind,” Cielo stuttered. I had to admit, they were a pretty well-balanced trio.

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, but our party already *has* a brilliant and beautiful Arch-priest in the form of me!” Aqua said.

“Hey, I don’t remember having any brilliant or beautiful Arch-priests around,” I said. “Ow, let go of me! ...Anyway, it sounds like these girls do have real skills. If nothing else. Try another party, kids. Catch you later.” Before they could say anything else, I got up and moved to another seat, Aqua still clutching my head in a death grip. My brain was too full of worries about our newfound debt problems to entertain any obnoxious new party members.

“Oh...,” I heard Lia say.

“What’s his problem?” Erika grumbled. “He’s just an adventurer himself, right? The weakest class? How could he possibly turn down the likes of us?”

“Wh-what should we do? There are no other parties looking for members,” said Cielo.

“Don’t give up hope. Maybe if we can just show him how great our abilities are,” Lia replied.

Gee, sorry for being the weakest class. I just didn’t want any more

adventuring companions who were going to cause more problems than they solved. I had my hands full already trying to babysit Aqua and company.

4

I left Megumin and Darkness to their own devices and went for a wander around town. Aqua, who apparently had time to kill, came with me.

"I dunno. I feel a little bad for those dancers," I said. "I can't help thinking they'd be better off with someone like Dust, though."

"You've got that right! What we need are real heavy hitters who can take on the hardest quests!" Aqua said, and I knew she was right. (Just ignore our own level of ability for now.)

That was when we heard a shout that carried all the way through town: "Ohhh, whatever am I to do?! To think, that I should have to take on a difficult, high-level quest!"

"Whazzat?" I said, turning—and then I frowned.

"Such an adorable, sweet, lovely young lady as myself could never tackle such a difficult task!"

"I-in that case, I shall go with you. I m-may not look like much, but I took top honors in a spear-fighting tournament!"

"A-and you have my aid as well! I'm an Arch-priest, but I know how to handle myself in a fight!"

"With such valiant companions at hand, I need not fear even should a dragon appear! Sweet, adorable, lovable Erika will be right beside you!"

There they were, right in our path: the three girls from earlier. They seemed to be putting on some kind of play, though. Did they think they were convincing us to let them join our party?

"Do you see the little glances they're shooting us, Kazuma?" Aqua said.

"Don't look, Aqua! If you meet their eyes, you'll start to feel pity for them! We need to get out of here as fast as we can!" I grabbed Aqua's cheeks and forced her to look away, then set off promptly in a different direction.

"Shoot... They left," I heard Cielo say.

"But why? I thought our performance was so natural... So compelling..."

"My foot! *You* girls are complete hams! It looks like I'm going to have to save this."

I completely agreed with Erika's criticism, but she'd been the worst offender of them all.

The next day, I was lazing on the couch like always, killing time, when Aqua came up to me, waving something in her hand. "Kazuma! Kazuma! You got something in the mail!"

"I did? Huh, I wonder what it is. It doesn't say who sent it... Guess I'd better open it." I had no idea what it might be, but I figured the chances of it being anything dangerous were pretty slim. "Are these... ladies' stockings? What the heck?"

"Look, there's a letter, too. Let's see here... *This is a down payment. Let us join your group, and we promise you even better stuff. Yours, sweet, adorable Erika.* Huh."

"What is that girl thinking?" I wondered. I just didn't understand her. Did she seriously think that this would make me want to adventure with them?

"I think the question is: What are *you* thinking, Kazuma? Sitting in the living room leering at a woman's stockings? Whose are they?! Tell me you didn't steal them!" It was Darkness, with impeccably bad timing.

"N-no, I didn't *steal* them! She sent them to me, all on her own!"

"Are you such a pervert? Do you admit at last, Kazuma, that you are an irredeemable pervert?!" Megumin demanded. *Admit? At last?* What was that all about?!

"Just hold on! Darkness! Megumin! I can explain!"

"Stay away from me, pervert!"

"I request that you maintain a five-meter radius from me!"

"Aw, look, Megumin, now you've got Darkness saying it, too! She's never called me a pervert before!"

"Y-you don't mean that!"

Gah! Thanks to those dancers, relations were getting worse and worse within my party. "Come with me, Aqua! We're gonna go give those pip-squeaks a piece of our minds!" I said.

I flew into the Adventurers Guild, looking this way and that. Where were those little bastards? Ah, there they were!

"Are you sure we should have sent him something like that?" Cielo was asking.

"Sure I'm sure! I guarantee you, it's only a matter of time before *he* comes to *us*, begging us to join his party!" Erika replied.

"Beg nothing! I've got you now, you hooligans!" I spotted the source of all my misery, and almost before I knew what I was doing, I

gave the pink head a sound smack.

“Ow! Who just walks up to someone and hits them on the head?! What if I turn into a blithering idiot because of you?”

“You already are! Serves you right, sending me a sick package like that. Thanks to you, my party members all think I’m some sort of deviant!”

“He’s right! I mean, we already thought he was kind of a sicko, but your delivery was the last straw. What were we supposed to think?” Aqua said.

“You stay out of— Wait, what was that? You *already* thought I was a perv?” What were they saying about me when my back was turned? I was going to have to investigate this *very closely*. But later.

“W-we do apologize for causing you such trouble. But Erika was desperate. She *so* wants to join your party,” said the boyish girl—Cielo, I seemed to recall. At least she was willing to apologize. It almost made her seem downright mature. But I knew better than to let my guard down.

“Hey, Kazuma... I’m starting to think maybe these girls have a story.”

“And does a *story* mean they can just do whatever the hell they want?! No way am I letting them into my group after they pulled a stunt like that!”

Cielo volunteered, “You see, the cart with all our stuff got blown up...”

“Your cart was blown up?” I said. That sounded oddly familiar. The girls looked at one another, then Lia started to open her mouth. No! Whatever she was going to say, I didn’t want to hear it! Not another word!

“Yeah. Exploded during the cabbage attack by someone’s magic. Our costumes, our props... They all went up in smoke...”

“If we’re going to put on a show, we need money for costumes and a performance venue and everything. We were hoping that by taking on a difficult quest, we might be able to work up some funds,” said Erika.

“But we weren’t confident that we could handle something like that on our own. That’s why we’re looking for people to go with us!” added Cielo.

Dammit, this was ringing way too many bells! So the wagon Megumin blew up that day—it had been carrying all these girls’ worldly possessions?! The driver *had* mentioned something about some dancers...

“Say,” Aqua started, “doesn’t that wagon sound a lot like the one Megumin—”

I clapped my hand over her mouth to shut her up. “Aqua! I’m d-

definitely with you. These girls obviously have a tragic backstory. And hey, people should help each other out, right? So let's find a nice, difficult quest and go for it!"

"Buff Gahthoomah..." Whatever Aqua was trying to say, I didn't want to hear it. She'd said plenty already. To be perfectly honest, I didn't want anything else to do with these girls, but if their trouble was our fault (okay, mostly Megumin's fault), I couldn't just stand by silently.

"Wait... You'll go with us?" Erika asked.

"Well, sure I will! How could I turn down three damsels in distress?" I replied. All right, so maybe I sounded suspiciously eager, but distraction seemed like the better part of valor here...

"Hey... It turns out you're a really good guy," Lia said.

Ow! My conscience! It hurt, knowing that I was also partly responsible for the complete destruction of all their equipment.

"But are you sure we can just take on some new party members without asking Megumin or Darkness?" I released Aqua with a stern warning not to make things worse, but for once she was saying something sensible.

"Let's call it provisional, then. We can go on a quest, see how it goes. I'd like to see just what these young ladies are capable of," I said. If it turned out not to be very much, that would be the perfect reason to boot them out again.

"Sounds good to us," Erika said. "Let's go! You'll see that we're not just a bunch of pretty faces!"

"Y-yeah, all right. I look forward to working with you," I said.

7

So we spent the day on a quest with three young dancers whom we'd met barely a few days before. I was waiting at Axel's town gate with Aqua and the others when the Axel Hearts showed up. Each girl was carrying the weapon she claimed to be proficient in; they looked like real adventurers.

"Looking forward to adventuring with you," Lia said.

"This sucks! They think they need to test *us* before they'll let us on board?!"

"Don't be rude, Erika... We're the ones asking them for a favor..."

Erika with her pink pigtails was the only one who looked unhappy about this situation.

"It's quite all right. I assure you, there is no one in this party so small-minded that they would get upset over a remark like that," Megumin said with studied calmness. Behind her, Darkness was nodding, *uh-huh, uh-huh*.

Small-minded, huh? Funny thing to say, considering that if you teased Megumin about explosion magic, Darkness about her real name, or Aqua about being a useless goddess, each of them would flip out on you.

“That’s not important. What matters is that we’re finally on a real quest. Let’s give this our best effort, everyone!” Darkness said.

“Yeah! I can’t let Cielo show me up as my junior Arch-priest,” Aqua remarked.

“Don’t get competitive,” I said.

A seemingly inevitable sequence of events had led to us going on this quest, but I couldn’t help wondering if this was really a good idea. I thought it might be a better plan to put plenty of distance between us and these dancers before they discovered that we were the ones who had incinerated their stage stuff.

My busy thinking was interrupted by a lighthearted call of “Hmm? Who’s that I see over there?” I turned to find Dust coming our way. “Kazuma! I knew it! What’re you doin’ knocking around here? And what’s with all the lovely ladies?! Wow! Don’t tell me you duped some *more* girls into—”

“Hey, watch how you talk about a guy! I didn’t *dupe* anybody!”

“Sure, man, if you say so, but I’ll bet these girls didn’t just walk up and ask to join your party. I’ll do you a solid, though—I won’t ask for the details. Hey, that cabbage thing the other day was really rough, huh?”

“Hrk!” He wasn’t going to talk about *that*... Was he?

“What happened the other day?” Lia asked, looking at me. Shit! I was getting a really, really bad feeling about this!

“These cabbages were going on a rampage, see. They were bashing the crap out of this performing troupe’s wagon! So Kazuma, he said to blow up—”

“Ahhhhhhh!” I cried. He was about to say something he definitely, definitely shouldn’t!

I thought my outburst had managed to drown out the end of his sentence. Had they heard?

“Hey, what’s with the yelling?” Dust said.

“Sorry, uh, we gotta get going on our quest! C’mon, everybody!”

“All right, girls! Tallyho and sally forth! We can’t waste another moment!” Lia said.

“Hey, Kazuma? Geez... What’s gotten into him?” Dust said.

I knew it wasn’t the most elegant way out of that situation, but I had to get us out of there before he said anything even more damning!

We made it to the cave where our quest was supposed to take place. It was a pretty unremarkable hole in the side of a mountain. I was just realizing—kind of belatedly, I know—that I'd been so distracted by the sky-high reward that I hadn't looked too closely at what the job actually involved.

As we worked our way through the cave, I took a fresh look at the quest paper. Huh—a gathering quest. Fetch this, grab that.

"Adamantite. That's used in making armor and stuff, right?" I said.

"That's right. My armor actually includes trace amounts of it," Darkness said. "It's extremely difficult to work with, though. Being such a hard material and everything."

"You have the Smith skill, Kazuma. You might be able to use the stuff without actually going to a blacksmith," Aqua observed. If she was right, that implied maybe I could craft and sell it directly to a buyer instead of going through the guild. Maybe focusing on my Smith skill would actually be an easier way to make money than what I was doing now. Vanir had asked me to devise some new items based on the knowledge I brought from Japan—maybe even I could manage to craft some simple stuff.

"Hello? I don't care about any of that. What I care about right now is taking a little break," Erika said.

"What do you mean? We just *took* a break," I said.

"Aw, don't be like that. Come on, pretty please?"

"No dice. And the cute-girl act won't get you anywhere." Nice try with the begging, but I stayed firm.

"Cute? You just said I was cute! I really appreciate you admitting how you really feel! Okay, then, I'll push myself just a *little* longer! So say it again, please?"

Yeesh. It was great that she was such a soft touch—it made her easy to manipulate. But this was getting annoying.

"It is ridiculous to be so pleased to be called cute. It is much more important to be cool!" Megumin interjected. It didn't look like she and Erika were going to get along. They wanted pretty much opposite things out of life.

"You're so wrong! Being cute is all-important! Cute, cute, cute, cute, cute, cute, cute!"

"Cool, cool, cool, cool, cool, cool, cool!"

Even little kids didn't get this obnoxious when they were arguing.

"Um, excuse me...", Cielo said.

"Knock it off, you two. We're in a dungeon. There might be traps. We have to go carefully," Lia said, but the blood had gone to both their heads and they weren't listening. I was starting to wonder if I should jump in to stop them. Lia was right—they were completely

forgetting that we were in a dungeon right now. If I let them continue to squabble, a monster was going to notice us.

“Cute, cute, cu— Huh? Do you hear footsteps?” Erika said.

“““““Aieeee!””””” All three of the girls plus Megumin let out a scream—and then they floated up in the air.

“Ugh, this stinks! What’s going on here?!” Erika demanded. She, the other two Axel Hearts, and Megumin had all been hauled into the air by a rope.

“Looks like a trap to me,” observed Aqua, safely on the ground.

“See the way the rope’s biting into their skin? Gee... That looks nice,” said Darkness.

“Enough with the analysis, Darkness, please help us!” said Cielo. She and the others looked pretty funny hanging up there.

“I-I’m concerned that in this position...our skirts...our skirts will flip down... Please don’t look, Kazuma! If you take another glance, I swear I’ll unleash my explosion magic on you!” Megumin said.

“Yeah, don’t worry. I’m not looking,” I said. Even though I totally was. And it was a heck of a view. Thank you, trap!

“Listen up, all of you! I don’t mind saying that I’ve been caught in plenty of traps in my time. But each time, I learned from the experience! So there’s nothing to be embarrassed about just because you stumbled into a little trap. Be trapped with pride!” Aqua said. Geez, what a time for her to start acting like a mature, experienced colleague.

“Sigh... I thought you had the Detect Trap skill, Erika,” Lia said.

“Oops! It’s been so long since we were on our last quest that I sort of forgot to use it... I’ll make sure to have it active next time.”

Speaking of oops, I’d failed to utilize Detect Trap myself. Sorry, girls...

“H-hey, Kazuma, why are you just standing around? I think you’d better hurry and help them,” Darkness said.

“Kazuma? Is anyone in there, Kazuma?” Aqua asked.

Hush. I’m enjoying this.

“My skirt!” Erika cried. “My skirt’s flipping...”

“Don’t—stop thrashing! The rope’s biting into me,” Lia said.

Cielo simply groaned, “Urrghh...”

The more they struggled, the worse things got—for them; the better for me. Excellent work, Erika. Excellent work.

I won’t say everything went *completely* smoothly after that, but smoothly enough.

“I found it! This is Adamantite, isn’t it?” Cielo said. She was

holding a rock that looked exactly like the one in the picture accompanying the quest description.

“That’s it for sure. And that’s all the Adamantite we need, I think. Our first quest is a success!” Lia proclaimed.

“With this party, gathering quests are no problem at all,” Erika said.

“Yep. Lia, you and your party took care of most of the monsters who showed up... We might actually be able to pull off a high-level quest this way,” I said. The Axel Hearts had turned out to be a lot more helpful than I had expected. I’d sort of assumed they were just dancing girls trying to drum up publicity by doing some adventuring on the side, but they knew how to handle themselves.

“Yes, it’s all very encouraging. The only thing I could perhaps complain about is being caught in a trap and subjected to untold humiliation,” Megumin remarked.

“Ha-ha... Yeah, that’s on us for letting our guard down. But you can see what we’re capable of now, right?” Lia asked. She held out her hand, and I shook it firmly.

“Yeah. Sorry for the whole putting-you-to-the-test thing. I look forward to, uh, working with you.”

“And so we have a contract to continue questing together. I, the goddess Aqua, shall serve as the witness to this agreement!”

“Goddess?” Lia asked. There was that word again. And we were so close to wrapping everything up nicely. I wished she would keep quiet.

“You can just ignore her,” I said. “She just says, uh, *unusual* things sometimes.” Darkness and Megumin both nodded.

“Say, Lia, where did you learn to use a spear like that? You’re obviously very good at it, but I’ve never seen a weapon quite like yours before,” Darkness said.

“Oh, uh... You know, I’m not really sure. It just sort of comes naturally.”

“Self-taught? Gosh, that’s even more impressive. A real achievement for someone so young.”

I wasn’t sure Darkness had any business complimenting someone on their fighting prowess when her own attacks couldn’t hit the broad side of a barn, but I had to agree that Lia had been very good at her job.

“And I was equally impressed by Erika’s speed and Cielo’s healing magic. They were both notably helpful,” said Megumin.

“Heh! Don’t act so surprised! I told you I’m more than just a pretty face!” Erika said.

“Y-you’re too kind...,” said Cielo. Unlike the wildly overspecialized Megumin and Darkness, these three could actually do

something in a battle. I was starting to think I might have more luck going adventuring with them.

“Cielo, Erika, nice to have you on board. Whaddaya say? Shake on it?”

I reached out and made to shake Cielo’s hand when Lia exclaimed, “No, don’t! When a man touches Cielo, she—”

“Noooooooo! Get *away* from me!” Cielo cried at the same moment. She accompanied her shout with a blinding right straight.

“Hnngh!” I was slammed against the wall with incredible force.

“I’m sorry! Cielo is extremely afraid of men. If one tries to touch her, she hits him before she knows what she’s doing!”

“That was a good, rooted strike for someone acting on pure instinct,” Megumin observed. Yeah, great. Maybe she could give me a helping hand before doing the commentary. I’d let my guard down because I’d started to think these three were normal people. Should’ve known there would be a catch. Wait... What was this?

“So you know something of the martial arts? You can clearly tell how to attack the vital points. It looks...*nice*,” Darkness said.

“Oh my gosh! I’m so sorry!” Cielo exclaimed.

“Aw, don’t worry about it. I’ll take the doctor’s bills and a little something for my trouble out of your reward. But check this out! I found it when I landed.”

“What a pretty stone... It’s like the color changes each time you look at it. Seems pretty valuable,” Aqua said, turning it in her hand.

Darkness peered at it. “This can’t be...unpolished alexandrite?”

“Is that valuable?” I asked.

“Nobles love it, especially for accessories and ornaments,” she said. “I’ll bet a chunk this size would fetch at least four million eris.”

“““F-four million?!””” Aqua, Erika, and I exclaimed in shock.

“Kazuma, we found this on a quest, so I’m sure we’ll share it just like any other reward, right?” said Aqua.

“I don’t know, Aqua, I found it *after* the quest was complete, so I’d say it’s mine. Hey, let go of that!” I had to work to snatch the stone back from Aqua, but I managed it and put it in my pouch.

“Four million eris! We could make a new set of costumes with that... Get back onstage...” Erika approached, looking as crazed as Aqua.

“Stumbling across a raw jewel like that,” Darkness said. “You can never count out Kazuma’s Luck.”

“Hey, maybe there’s more alexandrite around here!” said Erika.

“I don’t think so. If it were that easy to find, other adventurers would’ve picked the place clean by now,” Aqua said.

“I agree,” said Darkness. “This is a fortunate find, a combination of Cielo’s punch and Kazuma’s Luck.”

“Erk... I’m sorry,” Cielo said again, shrinking into herself.

Much as I would have liked to give her a piece of my mind, the gemstone had put me in a pretty generous mood. “Hah, don’t worry about it, Cielo. We’re adventuring companions, right? That thing about the doctor’s bills and whatever was just a joke.”

“The way to Kazuma’s heart is through his wallet, as ever,” Megumin remarked.

“There’s a reward waiting for us when we get back to the guild anyway. I think we should go home for today,” said Darkness.

“Kazuma! Oh, Kazuma! I think we should sell this thing and live it up a little this evening!” Aqua added. What, had she forgotten that we were suffocating under a pile of debt? Admittedly, four mil was a drop in the ocean compared to 450 million.

“Wait... Where’s Erika?” Lia said. Only then did I notice that I didn’t see her anywhere.

“Huh? I was sure she was right there,” I said.

“She didn’t go looking for more alexandrite, did she?” said Lia.

That was when we heard an earthshaking “Grrrraaaahhh!” and then a girl screaming, “Noooo! A monster! Help meeeee!”

“That was Erika!” Cielo said.

“It came from deeper in. Let’s hurry!” said Lia.

“Curse that Erika. It wasn’t enough for her to spring a trap. She had to get us into this kind of trouble, too?” I thought I recognized that roar... Were there Beginner’s Banes down here?!

We rounded a corner to find Erika on the ground, collapsed to her knees. Her weapon was rolling at her feet. Facing her were several monsters covered in black fur, each with two cruel fangs growing out of their mouths.

“C’mon, everyone!” I said. “Let’s get in there and help her!”

10

I heaved a sigh of relief as Lia finished off the last of the monsters. “Phew! Looks like we survived. You okay, Erika?”

“Hmph. I didn’t ask for your help.”

Bah! So she wasn’t even going to apologize? She wanted to play the tough-girl game? I was definitely going to let her have it this time.

“You *idiot*!” The sound of an open hand hitting Erika’s cheek echoed around the dungeon. It was Lia, right up in her friend’s face. “Erika! What in the world possessed you to go off alone?!”

“I just wanted some alexandrite... With that kind of money, we could get our show going again, right?”

“That’s no excuse to do something so dangerous! What if you had died?! You’d never find your parents!”

The tirade left Erika speechless; she just looked at the ground. This was obviously between the two of them—it wasn't our place to say anything. I would just stay quiet and see what happened.

"Hey... It looks like those two have some serious history," said Aqua, uncharacteristically sensitive to what was happening.

"I'm not sure we should stick our noses in," Darkness whispered back.

Cielo must have heard them, though, because she said, "We didn't mean to hide it... Erika grew up in an orphanage. She's never met her parents. I think she believes that if she's cute and sweet and lovable enough, they'll come to get her. That's why she became a dancer, so she could look for them."

That explained why she was here and why she had such a strong reaction to the word *cute*. Geez! That backstory was more tragic than I'd been expecting!

"Erika," Cielo said, turning to the other girl, "you know Lia's only mad at you because she cares about you, right?"

"Yeah, I know. You don't have to say it." Erika puffed out her cheeks and looked away.

"Well, what are you going to do? If you think what you did was wrong, then you should say you're sorry," said Lia.

"...I'm sorry. And...thanks for saving me."

"If you've learned your lesson, that's good enough. But promise me you won't do anything like that again. The three of us are a team! We need to be together to do our show!"

"Yeah... Yeah! I'm sorry. I'm so sorry! Waaaah! I'm sorry, Lia! I'm sorry, Cielo!" Erika started crying into Lia's chest. Cielo patted her on the back.

I guess all's well that ends well. That was fine by me. I never was very good at these serious moments. If that had gone on much longer, I probably would have ended up asking Aqua to do some party tricks to lighten the mood.

"Now that you're all friends again, how about we shake on it? C'mon, join hands...." I said, trying to wrap things up.

"Kazuma, I warned you what happens when a man tries to touch Cielo!"

"Nooooo!"

"Hnngh!" *I was watching out for it this time, and I still couldn't avoid it?!*

"Sigh... I tried to tell you."

"I-I'm sorry! I didn't mean it!"

"You know that's not an excuse, right?" I groaned.

With our quest over, we headed back to Axel. We decided to split the profits from the alexandrite evenly with Lia and her friends, just like the quest reward. Frankly, I really wanted to keep the gem for myself, but it seemed like the better thing to do when I thought about the future. The Axel Hearts used their share of the money to get new costumes made and rent a little theater in town so they could do a show.

When the day came...

"There's a lot more people here than I expected. I wonder if they're all fans of Lia and the girls," Aqua said.

"I guess it shouldn't be surprising," Darkness replied. "They've been traveling, but Axel is where they got their start. We just didn't know about them."

Aqua was trying to look everywhere at once, while Darkness was pretending to be cool even though she was obviously curious. As for me, I'd seen shows like this one on TV, but I hadn't experienced anything like it since coming to this world. Honestly, I was pretty psyched.

"It looks like it's starting," Megumin said. She was clutching her hat to her head and bouncing up and down, trying to see over all the people who'd shown up.

"Good day, everyone! Thank you all so much for coming out!" said Lia.

"There's so many of you... Eep! You'll have to excuse us! Sorry! Pardon us very much!" Cielo said.

"Hey, dial back the apologies!" Erika told her. "This is our first show in a while, so maybe we'd better start by reintroducing ourselves. We're..."

""""The dancing trio, Axel Hearts!"""" they said together and struck a pose. They were obviously still a little unpracticed and uncomfortable, but it was part of the charm. Just for a second, I thought I felt my heart flutter.

"W-we'll sing and dance just as best as we can! Please enjoy the show, everyone," Cielo said.

"But I'm warning you, if you take your eyes off me for a second, you'll regret it," said Erika. "You gotta take your time and really appreciate a gal this cute!"

"And now, for our first number...", Lia intoned.

I'd sort of assumed their singing and dancing couldn't be all that great, but I'd underestimated them again.

"Hey, those girls are pretty good!" Aqua said.

"They do seem to be firing up the crowd. Not as much as my explosion magic would, of course," replied Megumin.

"Yeah... It's not like the dances at court. Those are all form and

ritual. There's so much *life* in their performance! I think I could get used to music like this," Darkness said. I guess they weren't real familiar with dulcet tones like the Axel Hearts in this world. They were a lot like a Japanese idol group.

Wait...idols?

Okay, so the girls weren't perfect, but they could do a decent performance, and they were easy on the eyes to boot. They each had a distinctive personality. *I think this just might work!*

"What's with the look, Kazuma? Are you thinking about our debt again?" Darkness asked.

"No! Those girls...they're idols! The geese that lay the golden eggs! They sing, they dance—all they need is a little polish, and they could become shining stars! And stars mean even *more* money!"

"Idols? I'm afraid I don't know what you mean," Megumin said.

"It's a word for amazing performers with crazed fans," Aqua informed her, pleased to know something Megumin didn't.

I knew there were no idols in this world! *It could be a lot of work, but it's got to be safer than risking life and limb on some quest!*

I didn't have any other options. It wasn't a matter of *if* I should do it. I *had* to do it!

"That's it! I'll be their producer! We'll get them bigger stages, bigger shows! There'll be merchandise! Licensing! The idol business is what will wipe out our debts!" I exclaimed. If this worked, I would be rolling in cash! Or anyway, so I hoped.

Chapter Two

1

“There, I think that about does it,” I said. I’d asked the blacksmith if I could use a corner of his shop to do some work. When I pressed the button attached to the stick in my hand, the end glowed blue.

“You were so excited to borrow some workspace that I thought for sure you were gonna whip up a sword for yourself or something. But what’s that, um, glowing stick?” the smith asked. He’d been watching me as I worked feverishly on my project. He didn’t seem so much curious as, well, skeptical.

Fair enough. They’d never seen anything like it in this world.

“We call it a glow stick. And in my country, you light them up and shake them to cheer for the person you like best!” I said.

“Who’d want that?” he asked. Again, fair question. But I said, “Which world do you live in, old man? People will gladly pay money for something that will help them linger in the mind of the person they adore even a moment longer! I think towels or *happi* coats printed with those people’s names would sell pretty well, too, don’t you?”

“Can’t say I follow. You talkin’ about something like the soap and stewpots the Axis Church sells?”

“No, I’m... Well, actually, yeah, sort of. I just don’t want to get lumped in with them.” The last thing I wanted was for people to think I was anything like an Axis believer.

“Kazuma, Kazuma! I got that bunch of paper you asked me for!” Speaking of the world’s most obnoxious church, here came its head honcho. At least she’d brought what I wanted.

“Ooh! All right, now put *handshake coupon* on them along with a nice, official-looking stamp. And add plenty of provisos and legal mumbo jumbo on the back.”

“A handshake coupon? Is that like those things that come with idols’ CDs in Japan?”

Wow, she really was the (former) official goddess of Japan. I didn’t realize she knew about that stuff.

“You got it! I’m trying to get together everything we’ll need for the show—and start making samples of idol merch that we’ll target

directly at the Axel Hearts' fans!"

Back in my world, there'd been scads of idols each trying to get a piece of the pie, but here the most notable shows around mostly consisted of dancing girls performing for small audiences in modest theaters. With my idol know-how, I could send the girls' popularity skyrocketing—and make plenty of money doing it.

"I still don't rightly understand what you're doing, Kazuma," said the blacksmith. "All I know is that you look even more depraved than usual."

Aqua replied, "That's because we've got tons of debt, and money is all he can think about. But I know something about him. Times like this are when—"

"Excuse me!" I said. "Maybe you could stop bad-mouthing a guy when he's standing right here. Oops, no time to chat. A producer's work is never done!" I wouldn't normally have been interested in work that was this much, you know, *work*, but I could be if there was enough money involved. I wondered if this was how certain *real* producers felt. "Now I just need those towels and *happi*. Once I have some mock-ups, I can go to Lia and the others and see what they think!"

2

With an armload of merchandise, I visited the Axel Hearts at the house where they were staying. There was a desk in the front room, so I set down my prototypes.

"And there you have it! My experiments in dancing-girl goods. What do you think?"

"Well, uh, they're very... I mean... Well, what exactly are these 'goods' *for* anyway?" Erika was clearly puzzled. Cielo poked the pile hesitantly with her finger. Okay, so befuddlement wasn't the reaction I'd been hoping for, but the people of this world had never seen anything like this. I had known this might happen.

"Some of them are so people can cheer for you. Some of them help people feel closer to you. Lots of different stuff," I said.

"Um... And you really think people will want these things?"

"Definitely. Because the fans are gonna *love* you. Just imagine when you have a photograph of your favorite person's adorable face. You want to put it up in your room and stare at it all day. Basic psychology, right?"

"A-adorable? Oh, you! It's so nice of you to say how you really feel. I see what you mean—of course the fans would want products featuring someone as cute as yours truly!" Erika said. I was a little concerned about her—was the word *cute* really all it took to wrap her

around your little finger?—but it was certainly a convenient way to keep the conversation moving.

“You’ve got that right! These goods are also going to be a great way to spread the good word about you girls and your adorability far and wide. That’s how the future begins! And speaking of the future, I’d like to talk a bit about our next steps.”

“Huh! I guess we’d better. I’ll put on our most delicious tea, and we can talk as long as you like!” said Erika.

I glanced around. “Hmm? I don’t see Lia anywhere.” I’d been so fixated on my prototypes that the fact that we were missing someone had hardly registered with me.

“I think she’s sleeping in her room,” Cielo said.

“Well, this is a very important conversation that could change the course of all three of your lives. Let’s go wake her up, okay?”

We tromped over to Lia’s door, and Cielo knocked. We waited a second and heard...nothing.

“Lia? Are you still asleep?” Cielo called.

“Kazuma says he has something to talk about with our adorable selves. Get up already!” Erika added.

We waited another minute, but there was still no response. In fact, there wasn’t so much as a sound.

“I think it might be quicker to go in there and wake her up ourselves,” I suggested.

“N-no!” Cielo said. “Lia’s room is—”

Well, of course she tried to stop me. But we were talking about a room where a pretty girl was just waking up from her nap. Who could resist that? I’ll tell you: Not me!

“Ha! You silly girls. It’s nothing to be embarrassed about. Helllllooo, Lia! Kazuma is here to help you rise and shi—iiiiit!”

“Cielo tried to stop you...” Erika groaned. It was too late. I couldn’t tear my eyes off the scene before me. Empty bottles and snack wrappers were everywhere... And was the soup in this bowl frozen? I’d never seen a room so dirty!

“H-hmm? Who’s there? Cielo? Erika?” Lia sat up. Her revealing sleepwear was pretty sexy, but it couldn’t overcome the horrifying state of the room.

“Good morning, Lia. Kazuma wants to talk to us...”

“Oh, good morning, Kazuma... Don’t just stand there—have a seat. Wherever you like.”

Have a seat? I couldn’t see anywhere to walk, let alone sit! Lia looked like she had it together, but apparently she never cleaned up after herself.

“Argh. You didn’t even put on fresh underwear?” Cielo said. Were those panties she was holding?! Hoh! And *what* panties! I never would

have expected it of such a cool and collected young woman!

“Hrk! H-hey, put those down! Even I’m a little embarrassed when it comes to my panties...”

“You should be embarrassed when it comes to this *mess*!” I said. “But anyway. We’ve got important things to talk about today—”

“Lia, there are ants on your leftover snacks! Clean this up right now!” Cielo interrupted. She was holding up a snack bag that was crawling with insects.

“Aw, it’s fine. The ants have to eat, too, don’t they?”

“A-ahem. Today, I have a very important—”

“Ugh, and this drink is spoiled! No wonder the house smells so bad... Throw this out right this minute!”

“G-geez, you don’t have to get so upset. I promise I’ll clean up on our next break.”

“Oh, just do it, for crying out loud!” I said. “I’ll even help you! Or else we’re never going to have this conversation!”

3

It took hours, but we somehow managed to clean up Lia’s room enough that it looked like a human being could live there. There was a terrifying amount of trash.

“I’m not saying your room’s got to be sparkly clean all the time, but you need to at least keep it nice enough that a person could step inside,” I said. My own room when I’d been a shut-in in Japan had been better than that! Lia’s place was a truly tragic sight.

“I can’t believe you were able to get it so clean! Please, feel free to visit more often!” Cielo said. It’s nice that she was grateful and all, but she was completely losing sight of what I was really here for.

“Yeah, great. I didn’t come here today to help you clean up. I want to make you the most popular—”

“I was so sure you were just a petty, lustful man! I think I’ve misjudged you!” Erika said.

“Uh, I’m a little shocked to hear what kind of person you took me for. But I’m glad you’re thinking twice. So maybe we can have a nice chat, then. I’m here today because I want to be your prod—”

“Hey! I don’t see my stuffed animal anywhere! Where’d Mr. Ponta go?!” Lia tore open her closet and dresser, dumping the clothes we’d just put away all over the bed.

Geez! We weren’t getting *anywhere* here!

“I just put those away, dammit!” I cried. “I gave your stuffed animal a good washing, and I put it outside to dry—heey! Will you listen to me?! I came here to be your producer, not your maid!”

“““Pro-doo-ser?””” the girls chorused. They turned toward me as

one, confused. Sure, *now* they were in sync.

“Yes! You girls... I’m going to turn you into the world’s favorite dance group!” They watched me, still set back on their heels a bit by the unfamiliar idea of a “producer.” I went on, “First things first. Cielo, your dancing is a little sharper than Lia’s and Erika’s. Do you come from a performing background?”

“No, not really... It’s just, I had to learn martial arts. It probably taught me how to use my feet.”

I’d noticed during our battles in the cave that she had a good base and kept herself stable.

“Aw, come on, you only have nice things to say about Cielo? I don’t think I’m such a bad dancer myself!” Erika said. She gave a little spin—something she could do now that the room was clean—and struck a pose. This opportunity to get a good, close look at her made it obvious that she was the most idol-ready of any of them.

“You’re great at getting an audience behind you, Erika. Just looking at you is enough to make a person want to root for you.”

“Heh! And don’t forget my tremendous cuteness!”

It was nice to know I could just drop that word whenever I needed to get her to bend a little. It was true, she was pretty—but I was used to the likes of Aqua, Megumin, and Darkness, so I wasn’t sure I would have said *tremendously* cute. Man, my party sure was good-looking. If *nothing* else.

“And, Lia, you’re a pretty good singer. Do you write your own songs?” Lia had definitely been the standout songstress of the show I’d seen. She’d sung something that a lot of actual pop idols in Japan would have stumbled over. If she’d written it herself, too, that would show some pretty serious talent.

“Yes, I do. I have a magic item that can take any melody—whether you hum it or play it on an instrument or anything—and turn it into a song.”

“Huh! That’s convenient!”

“We call it our Magic Piano,” Erika said. “It’s right over there, see? It’s really something—it can make all kinds of sounds!” She pointed to what looked like an electronic instrument sitting on the desk. It had black keys and white keys, just like a keyboard from my world.

“Erika and I can’t actually use it, so we always have to get Lia to do it. I really wish I could play it...,” Cielo said. So it seemed like the keyboard—or was it a synthesizer?—wasn’t originally from this world. Maybe I could get Lia to show me how it worked.

“So you’ve got the songs, you’ve got the dance, you’ve got the looks. You three are definitely on the right track. But are you really satisfied with where you’re at right now? Don’t you want to aim

higher?" I said.

Erika exclaimed, "Of course we do! I need the whole world to see how lovely and cute and adorable I am!"

"It's true that I'd like to keep being onstage," Lia said. "I'd like to sing everything I can with this group."

"Y-yes, I feel the same way! So that someday I can overcome my fear of men and be the perfect girl!" Cielo said.

Three young ladies, three different goals in life—but all of them shared a desire to make it big as dancers. If I could keep them focused on that, this might just work.

"Okay, I see. But let's be frank, kids. The three of you alone don't have it in you to get any more popular than you already are."

"What?"

"We don't?"

"You don't get to decide that! We're still growing! We can still get better!"

Lia sounded startled, Cielo despairing, and Erika outraged. It was the perfect demonstration of all three of their personalities.

They were shaken. Now was the time for some hard truths. "You could learn to be the best dancers in the world, and you could still be the worst at getting an audience! That's a totally different skill. Do you know how many would-be famous dancers there are out there, lost to the mists of time because they didn't know how to grab eyeballs?"

"Gosh, you really seem to know what you're talking about. It's like you've seen it yourself," Lia said. Oh, I'd seen it, all right. (Admittedly, only through a TV screen.)

"Let me share a little secret with you. I usually keep this on the down-low, but I come from a country that's *lousy* with dancing-girl traditions!"

"Wow! Y-you do?!"

All right, so it wasn't really *dancing girls* so much as *pop idols*, but it wasn't a complete lie...was it?

"Yeah. And I've seen plenty of dancers go at it tooth and nail on the stage. Let me tell you what I've learned." Here I paused deliberately, creating suspense. When I could see I had their undivided attention, I said, "If you want to get to the top, you *need* a producer to back you! You think being cute is all it takes to put butts in seats? Wrong, wrong, wrong!"

"What? Did you just say I'm cute? Oooh, whatever will I do?! I've made another man fall head over heels without even meaning to! Oh, I'm such a naughty girl...!" Erika said, putting her hands to her cheeks and squirming. She was off and running again.

"My dear, adorable Erika, could you shut up for a second?"

“Yes, sir! Adorable Erika, shutting up!”

It was great that it was so easy to get her to do what I wanted, but going through the exact same exchange every time was getting to be kind of obnoxious.

“All right, moving on. I can’t deny you girls have talent. But you’re unpolished. Diamonds in the rough. You need someone who will polish you, turn you into shining gemstones! You need...a producer!” I was ripping my speech clean off some audition footage I’d seen once, but they didn’t know that.

“U-um, if you don’t mind my asking... again... What is a producer, exactly?” Cielo said.

“A producer helps dancers like you improve their act—and then helps them reach fans with it!” I said.

They all looked at me with furrowed brows. This didn’t seem to be making sense to them. But only a second-rate swindler would back down in the face of a little confusion. Chin up, chest out, voice loud all the time! That was the way!

“I’ve got tons of experience with dancers from my culture. And I, Kazuma Sato, am willing to help the three of you!” I said.

And by tons of experience, I meant I had watched a lot of music programs! And then said whatever everyone else was saying about them!

“You will?! You’re going to join forces with the oh-so-adorable us?! That’s fantastic!”

“Hold on a second... Okay, so you say you’re going to be our producer. But what exactly are you going to *do*?” Lia asked. An excellent question. She was definitely the sharpest of the lot.

“I have plans for getting you out there, getting you your big break. First, we get out of Axel and perform everywhere we can! That’s called going on tour.”

“But that’s exactly what we’ve been doing,” she said, sounding a bit disappointed.

“Now, now, don’t get ahead of me. *This* time we’re going to accompany those performances with merchandise! We’ll have meet and greets! Handshake events!”

Life in Japan had proven to me that those were guaranteed moneymakers. If you could get a dedicated fan base, they would cough up for anything and everything.

“Handshake events? Like, we’ll literally shake hands with our fans?” Cielo said.

“Just a second, Kazuma. I think you’re forgetting something. Like what happens when a man tries to touch Cielo...”

“It’s a *handshake* event. We practice her handshakes. That’s how we help her get over her fear of men. You’ll never succeed if you hide

from your own weaknesses! And Cielo's not the only one who'll get something out of this tour. You and Lia are gonna do great with it, too."

"We are...?" Lia didn't look entirely convinced, but she was definitely listening. One more push, and I thought I could get her on board.

"Axel is the farthest town from the Demon King's castle, right? Perform all you want out here—who's going to hear about you? If you want to bring the world to you, first you have to go to the world! Knock 'em dead out there, then *they'll* be knocking down your door begging you to perform! You said you wanted to keep being onstage, right, Lia?"

"W-well, yeah..."

"And you, Erika. The more places you perform and the more people know about you, the more likely you are to find your parents!"

"Kazuma...", Erika said.

"You'd do all that for us, Kazuma?" Cielo's eyes were brimming with tears of gratitude. Perfect! This was in the bag.

"Wait... This doesn't make sense. Why would you go so far out of your way to help some girls you just met a few days ago?" Lia asked. Leave it to her to rain on my parade just as I was about to seal the deal. She was definitely the one I would have to watch out for. But for now, I would show her just how good a talker Kazuma Sato could be.

"Didn't I say?" I asked. "You're unpolished gems. You just made me want to take a risk on you! That's why I'm throwing everything behind you, starting now. I don't care if I have to put every eris I have into this project!" I tried to sound especially passionate. Okay, so I was stretching the truth a little bit—but you had to get your point across in moments like this.

"You are? You will?" Lia said.

"Yep. So let me ask you again. Will you three let me be your producer?"

They looked at one another, then shared a nod. They turned back to me.

"We sure will! I want you to show the world exactly how adorable I am!" Erika said.

"I'll do my very best to be as good as you think I can be, Kazuma!" added Cielo.

"I guess I'm with them. We look forward to working with you, Kazuma," said Lia.

Mission successful! I'm not saying my conscience felt *completely* clear, but the girls definitely had the makings of real stars. This was a win-win situation for sure. They got to be pop idols, and I got to clear my debt! I clenched my fist in triumph (making sure the girls couldn't

see me).

“Lia! Cielo! Erika! Starting today, our destinies are linked to one another! I’m taking you to the top of the dancing-girl world!” I gave them my most confident smile and an encouraging nod. Then I added, “Ahem... And as I mentioned, the guy running a group of dancers is called the producer. So I’ll thank you to address me as such.”

“We sure will, Mr. Producer!” Erika replied.

“So you’re our producer... Well, I for one am thrilled to be working with you,” said Lia.

And Cielo: “I-I’ll do my very best, Mr. Producer. You’ll see!”

This was feeling pretty...good! I was starting to think I could understand those guys who got way into idol-raising games.

“Hey. You look pretty happy,” Erika said.

“Oh, it’s nothing. Just a passing thought. You can ignore me. Ahem! Girls of the Axel Hearts! Let’s give this everything we’ve got! Are you ready for some merciless training?”

““““Yes, sir!””””

4

The Axel Hearts did a few more successful shows in Axel itself, and then we went on tour. Our itinerary saw us making a stop in Crimson Magic Village...

As the best at working a crowd, Erika started us off: “What a pleasure to meet all you Crimson Magic villagers!”

Then the girls chorused, ““““We’re the kind of dancing group that comes along once every thousand years! We’re the Axel Hearts!”””” and struck a pose. Not a great one, I had to admit.

“Okay, stop right there,” I said. “Let’s pause this rehearsal!” We were on the outdoor stage in the town square that the Hearts would be using, and we were rehearsing, and rehearsing, and rehearsing. “Let’s hear from our Crimson Magic test audience. What do you think of the show so far? Let’s start with Arue.”

The girls in the audience were looking a bit perplexed, but Arue said, “That was certainly a close one. It’s a good thing the rehearsal ended when it did.”

What was with Arue and these grim pronouncements? I guess it should have been obvious enough that she wasn’t quite normal. She kept her left eye covered with an eye patch, and she always claimed she was writing a novel. Plus she lived in this weird-ass village.

Megumin was the next to give her opinion: “Lia’s singing tugs on the heartstrings, that much is true. But it lacks something... There’s an *explosive* element missing!”

I figured we could ignore her. Explosive element, my foot. “You’ve

been saying that since day one. Yunyun, Komekko, what's your take?" I asked, turning to test-audience members three and four.

The first of these remaining observers was Yunyun, who for some reason had insisted she would come along when she heard we were going to the village. She definitely seemed like the most, y'know, *sane* person around here.

"I—I thought they were very cute and all-around wonderful," she said.

"So-so!" exclaimed Komekko, who represented the youth demographic.

"Wow. Out of the mouths of babes, huh?" I said. Maybe only a kid could be so unfiltered. Komekko was Megumin's little sister, but she actually seemed more calculating—more *grown-up*—than Megumin.

So only Yunyun was genuinely happy with the performance. Lia, caught off guard by the response, was clearly disappointed. "We got a pretty decent reception in Axel... How could things be so different here?"

"You have to adapt your performance for the venue and the quality of the audience," I said. "I'm actually happy you're figuring this out now. The whole reason I wanted Arue and Komekko at the rehearsal was so we could get their feedback and work out the right strategy."

"Strategy!" Arue said. "If it's strategy you want, then allow me to cease pulling my punches. There is one crucial thing you're missing, one fatal flaw in your performance." She was gesticulating like she was onstage herself. Who did she think the performers were here? I considered trying to stop her but thought better of it. If we let her talk, she might actually say something useful.

"Um... Is it self-confidence?" Cielo asked, hesitantly raising her hand.

"You do indeed lack that. But I speak of something far more critical."

"You think we need to craft our self-introduction a little more carefully?" volunteered Lia. About what you'd expect from the quintessential overachiever.

"Close, but no cigar. You've nearly hit the heart of the matter."

What happened to not pulling any punches? Why all the pretentious flimflam? What was she, drunk on her own importance at this moment?

"I've got it! I'm the absolute cutest thing about this group, so I should be the center of attention! That's what you're trying to say, isn't it?" said Erika.

"Um, no."

Wow. No hesitation there.

Megumin jumped in. “I see none of you understand. Therefore, allow me to enlighten you. What you, Lia, and you, Erika, and you, Cielo, lack is...*coolness!*”

The other Crimson Magickers nodded emphatically.

“What are you talking about?” said Erika. “We’re dancers! People want cuteness from us, not coolness!”

“Heh! Then allow me to demonstrate with my very flesh that what I say is true. Behold—*this* is a self-introduction that pierces the heart of all who hear it!”

As if on cue, Arue, Komekko, and Yunyun gathered around Megumin. Had they planned this pose in advance? They were so smooth, so together, that it made you wonder.

“My name is Megumin! Arch-wizard and master of Explosion!”

“My name is Arue! Most *developed* mage in the Crimson Magic Clan and she who seeks to become an author!”

“My name is Komekko! Most mischievous little sister in the Crimson Magic Clan! And stronger than the Demon King’s generals!”



“M-m-my name is...um...” Yunyun was, let’s say, not as enthusiastic as the other three.

“What are you so embarrassed about, Yunyun? And you call yourself the chief’s daughter! Do it just like we did in rehearsal!”

Rehearsal? So they *had* practiced this!

“You’re the only one who can’t do it, Yunyun. Don’t you feel lonely?”

Ooh, Komekko, that was a low blow. Don’t be like that.

“I-I’m not lonely! I... I just...”

“If you can do this self-intro, I’m sure you’ll make tons of friends!” Komekko pressed. Yunyun caught her breath. That was quite the temptation. So the magic word was *cute* for Erika and *friends* for Yunyun. The only thing you had to say to get them to listen.

“F-friends?” Yunyun asked.

Yup. Hook, line, and sinker.

“My name is Yunyun! Foremost magic user of the Crimson Magic Clan, and she who shall one day be chief of the village!!”

They struck a pose. The lightning bolt that crashed behind them was presumably Yunyun and Arue using magic.

“It’s certainly more...impactful than our introduction,” Cielo said. “Maybe this can point us in the right direction to work out an introduction that will really land with the Crimson Magic Clan.” She was a diligent one, Cielo. But in this village, the girls weren’t entirely wrong. The populace here had some funny ideas about things, to say the least. The Axel Hearts got completely sucked into the Crimson Magic “thing,” gamely trying to come up with increasingly ridiculous personal introductions.

As for me... I decided to hold my peace and see where this went.

5

The show at the village was a success—and so were the goods. We made a tidy profit. The next place our little team went, albeit with much trepidation and no small amount of grumbling, was the city of water and hot springs, Arcanletia.

“So this is Arcanletia! Hey, this looks like a pretty fun town!” Erika was innocently enjoying herself—but ignorance is bliss, as she was so richly demonstrating.

“Megumin was so against coming here that I wondered what it could possibly be like, but this place is gorgeous,” said Lia, gazing out at the cityscape. Arcanletia was famous for its natural springs and clear lakes, and the town was crisscrossed with canals. Blue was the predominant color, giving the city a nice, clean look. I’d been pretty

taken with it myself, the first time I'd come here.

Sure, the scenery's great. But Megumin's right. If I didn't think I could make money here, I'd never have come back. In fact, I'm already regretting this a little... Make that a lot.

"It sounded like Aqua knew this place pretty well. Are you sure she shouldn't have come with us?"

Don't be stupid, Cielo. If she were here, she'd be sure to put us on a collision course with a whole lot of trouble. That's exactly why I left her at home.

"I'll just have to work hard enough for Aqua and Megumin both," said Darkness. She'd been the only one to come with us happily. As for exactly why... Well, I didn't want to think about it. "I can do security during the show, help with selling stuff—just tell me what you need!"

"That's great, Darkness. The first thing I need is for you to put away that Eris Church charm so nobody sees it."

"No!"

I'd known it would be useless, but I had to ask.

"You want kids throwing rocks at you again?"

"As a matter of fact, I do!"

"I knew there had to be a reason everyone in town's been giving us the evil eye ever since we got here! Put that damn thing away! We'll never move merchandise like that!"

"No! You can't have it!" she cried.

I tried to swipe the symbol from her, but she fought back with that monstrous strength of hers. I thought she was here to help! But she was only going to drag us down like this! Dammit, were we even going to be able to do a show this way?!

6

It turned out all my fretting was for nothing—the show went fine. It almost took the wind out of my sails after all that anxiety, but that was a small price to pay for things going smoothly.

"Thank you all so much for being here today!" Lia said, bowing politely. Cielo and Erika imitated her, the audience showering them with applause and cheers.

"Looks like the Arcanletia leg of the tour is almost over," Darkness said. "Too bad."

"Yeah... Wait, what's too bad about it?"

"I was hoping...er, I mean afraid that they'd mock and abuse me way more than this. Guess it's just as well it didn't come to anything."

It was true; we'd gotten through the entire show without any serious problems. But I knew not to let my guard down until we were safely out of town. This was, after all, the home base of the Axis

Church.

“All right, check this out! We’re selling pictures of your favorite, Erika, with a handshake coupon!”

“One towel and one photo? Thank you very much. Wow, you even brought one of me...,” Cielo said.

“Thanks for coming out for us. The handshake meet will be in a little bit. Just hang on, okay?”

Erika, Cielo, and Lia (in that order) were busy moving merch. I was a bit worried about Darkness, but at least the three girls were working hard. The sight must have inspired her, because she took a placard and started shouting at the top of her lungs: “Form two lines, please! Merchandise with handshake tickets included in this line, if you don’t mind!”

“Pfah! Like we’d ever listen to anything an *Eris* follower told us to do!” someone shouted.

“Hngh... I’m only trying to help... And look what happens! I can’t stand it!”

Okay, I was starting to get a little concerned, but we were still selling well. I was so glad I’d been able to develop the merchandise in time. I felt justified in having asked Vanir for help. I’d originally planned to create everything myself, but being a producer kept me busier than I’d expected, and I’d ended up turning to him to handle some of the work. That increased the initial outlay, but it looked like we were going to sell ourselves right into the black here in Arcanletia. The handshake tickets were every bit as popular as I’d expected. We should get some more of them out there and *really* drive up sales! This was going to work!

“Oh, Lia, your singing made my very heart feel more whole. Your voice is so clear and pure; you sound nearly as beautiful as Lady Aqua herself!”

Ooh, that was a mother with her little girl talking. I’d pictured men as my target market, but there was nothing better than a demographic crossover. We needed to make sure these fans felt particularly welcome.

“G-gee, thank you. I’m a little embarrassed...,” Lia said.

“Me, I’m a big fan of Erika! She’s so shimmery and so adorable!” the little girl said.

“Oh! *Well!* Aren’t you a clever one! How about a photo, on us?” Erika was charmed. So she could bring in the kids—I would have to remember that.

“Um, uh, what’s the difference between merchandise with handshake tickets and the ones without them?” the girl said.

“It just means that if you buy a product with a ticket, you can come to the handshake event we’re doing later,” Cielo explained.

The kid got a huge grin on her face. “We can shake your hands?! I wanna do that!”

“No, sweetheart,” her mother said. “We don’t have time for the handshake event...or the money for one of the tickets...” Geez. It almost made me feel like I was doing something wrong, selling those tickets.

No! This was business. It was all about paying off my debts!

“I g-guess one little handshake couldn’t hurt...” Erika, obviously a softer touch than me, reached out.

“Uh-uh. It’s okay. It wouldn’t be fair to everyone who bought tickets for me to shake your hand without one. But maybe...you could sign this for me, Erika? I don’t have a proper autograph pad, but I have a piece of paper here.” The girl shyly brought out a sheet.

“Sure! Let me just find a pen...”

“Don’t let her trick you!” I howled. “That’s an Axis confession of faith!”

7

“Sniff... Snrrrf... That was so scary! I almost joined their church!”

Yeah, definitely traumatizing. Erika was curled up into a ball, shaking. You couldn’t let your guard down with these Axis believers—they’d take any and every chance to try to get you to sign a confession of faith. Heck, the little girl even had *me* going. You really had to be careful.

“I have a bad feeling you might end up signing something you’ll regret if I leave you to your own devices, Erika. Maybe I can have Darkness run interference for you. Sigh... And we haven’t even started thinking about how to handle the problem of the handshake event.”

“Problem?” Lia asked. Geez, hadn’t she caught on yet? *You girls have been together longer than I’ve been with you!*

“Yes, problem. The *big* problem. You know—Cielo, shake my hand.”

“Eeeeeek!”

And here she came with the punch to the fa— Whaa—?!

“Hngh! Wasn’t expecting a faint to the face to set me up for a jab to the torso. No way out of that one... Looks like Cielo isn’t over her androphobia. Do you think a pair of gloves would make you more comfortable shaking hands?”

She held out a trembling hand with all five fingers extended. So she wanted five layers? W-well, I guess we could swing that...

“M-maybe with fifty layers...,” she said.

“Fifty?! You’re going to end up with boxing gloves on! Ugh... Guess we don’t have a choice for today. We need some profit! So I’ll

get you fifty gloves, and you shake hands! Darkness, if anything happens, you're in charge of— Hey, where is Darkness anyway?" I looked around and spotted her surrounded by some kids.

"Bah! Take this, you dirty Eris follower!"

"Ow! N-noo! Stopppp!"

"Looks like some Axis kids are throwing rocks at her. Don't you think we should help?" Erika asked. She sounded genuinely worried, but in my mind there was only one answer.

"Nah. Forget about her."

"Huh?! How can we forget about her? Darkness, are you okay?!" Erika asked, rushing over to her. She didn't understand.

"Yeah, I'm fine. In fact, I love this town. *Pant... Pant...* I think I might just stay here awhile!" Darkness's cheeks were bright red and there was a look of sheer joy on her face. Erika stared at her open-mouthed.

See?

Sigh. Guess it would be up to me to run interference.

8

With our Arcanletia show safely (?) over, my dancers and I rode the wave of success straight to the capital.

Considering that Darkness had been no use at all on the last leg of our trip, I finally resigned myself to hiring someone to help out. I turned to the least busy, most free-time-having guy I knew—Dust—but he said, "Ugh, the capital? Pass. I don't want to get anywhere near that place."

How dare he turn me down? Aqua and Megumin were both busy, so in the end the Axel Hearts and I had no choice but to make it on our own.

"Wow!" Erika said. "I didn't know city gates even came this big!"

I could understand her amazement. This was on a different scale from anything in Axel or the towns and villages we'd visited on tour. Erika couldn't seem to get over it.

"Well, sure! Don't forget, the king lives here. Soldiers forged in the crucible of combat over hundreds of battles guard this city day and night against the incursions of the Demon King!" Cielo said, apparently appointing herself our expositor.

"You know your stuff, Cielo. Have you been here before?" I asked.

"I'll bet she has," Lia said. "Cielo's a noble, you know."

"Huh, so Cielo's a noble... Wait, she is?! How d'you get by in society when you're constantly punching every guy who says hello?!"

Now that Lia mentioned it, it occurred to me that Cielo had the golden hair that was the distinguishing feature of so many nobles

around here.

“Hey, how dare you be so rude to a young lady!”

“It’s all right, Erika,” Cielo said. “He’s not wrong; I do tend to get violent. And it’s true... Polite society proved too much for me. I was raised as a boy until my parents could produce a male heir, but other nobles said I was too delicate.”

So she’d been bullied? Was that why she was so scared of men? Huh, so Cielo had had her struggles. Still, you’d think that right straight would have shut people up pretty fast. I thought a word of warning was in order. “Keep in mind that the capital is a big city, and there are lots of guys here. Try to be even more careful than usual not to start anything.”

“We’ve got two days in the capital! Two days to sell as much as we can before and after the performance. Sell, sell, sell!” Erika exclaimed.

“Yes... I’ll do my very best,” Cielo said.

As responses went, it wasn’t very reassuring.

9

“““Thank you all very much for being here today! We look forward to doing this again tomorrow!””” the Axel Hearts chorused. The audience responded with cheers.

“They did a heck of a job today,” I said to myself as I watched from the wings, clapping unabashedly. I’d become their producer in hopes of making a bunch of money, but I was starting to think maybe I was really cut out for the idol world. Maybe I should just keep doing this. Instead of running myself ragged babysitting Aqua and the others, I could be making people happy, working with these pleasant young ladies. Wouldn’t that be nicer for me? Heck, the whole reason I was under a pile of debt right now was because Megumin had refused to listen to me. I was an innocent victim!

Those were the thoughts running through my mind as the show came to a safe conclusion, and the theater resounded with applause.

“Erikaaa! You’re so cute! Could you do the self-intro just for me? Pretty please?”

“Oh, you twisted my arm... We’re the world’s most comely collection of cuties! Loveliness one thousand percent! I’m Erika!”

She responded to the fan’s request with complete conviction—the epitome of an idol. It was incredible what you could do if you were used to it. Those words were so embarrassing they used to make me cringe just listening to them, but now I didn’t bat an eye.

“Lia! Another amazing show! I’ve been following you ever since you started in Axel!”

“Really? That’s so great. But...that’s such a long way. Make sure you take care of your health, okay?”

Good stuff, Lia! That’s the sort of personal investment that makes the fans really go wild for you—and willing to pay any amount of money! Lia seemed genuinely concerned about her admirer’s well-being, but that only showed she had a natural talent for wringing it out of ’em.

“C-Cielo! You’re so small and sweet in person!”

“Oh, th-thank you. Ha-ha! Ha-ha-ah!”

“It’s a dream come true to shake your hand, even if it is through these huge, thick gloves. Cielo is really right next to me!”

Cielo seemed to get some weird fans. Maybe it was because she seemed the most mature of the three of them. Or maybe her talent just happened to be for drawing out the freaks.

“All right, time’s up. Thank you so very much. If the next person would please— I’m sorry, you there. You can’t cut in line!” I said. Phew! Doing crowd control for all these people, all by myself, was rough. Maybe I should have tried to get Aqua and the others a little more involved.

I was jerked back to reality when Cielo screamed, “St-stop! Please don’t!”

Crap. Another handsy customer? The troublemaker in question was well-dressed but physically very large, a man with the kind of potbelly you sometimes see on middle-aged dudes. His breath was hot in his nostrils, and he was clearly not taking “get the hell away from me” for an answer.

“Why shouldn’t I? Did I buy some merch with a Cielo handshake ticket or didn’t I?! I’ve got a right to shake your *hand*! Not this stupid glove!”

I knew someone would try to pull this, and I’d come ready.

“I’m very sorry, sir, but the terms and conditions on the ticket clearly cover that concern,” I said, pointing to the fine text. I tried to squeeze between Cielo and the aggressive guy, but he just batted me away. Who would have guessed he would be so strong?

“Shut your yap! And you, take that glove off! *Now!*”

“No! Don’t!”

The troublemaker pulled off Cielo’s glove and went to grab her bare hand. Idiot! Didn’t he realize what would happen?!

“Sir, please don’t touch the dancers without per—”

“*Shake my hand!*”

“Noooooooooo!”

“Hrrrgh!” The hand the guy seemed so obsessed with launched out and caught him across the jaw. He tumbled to the floor and rolled until he hit the wall, where he stopped moving.

Now she'd done it!

"Oh no! Sir!" I cried. "Hey, Cielo, calm d—"

"Stay away from me!"

"Yargh!"

Cielo, too agitated to know what she was doing, sent me flying with a merciless blow to the chin. Dammit! This was more than I could handle by myself. I should have brought Darkness or Megumin along...!

I tried again: "Cielo! J-just calm down!"

"Oh no! I'm so sorry, Kazuma! I didn't mean to..."

"You should be apologizing to our customer, not to me!" Word of an incident like this would spread like wildfire, and then what would happen to my moneymakers?! I wished for some way to get us out of this.

Erika went over to the toppled customer and said sweetly, "H-hey, are you okay? I promise Cielo didn't *mean* to hurt you. If you could not hold this against her, that would be great..."

Thanks for trying, Erika, but I really don't think—

"H-hold it against her? Perish the thought! S-such tremendous violence... What true, inspired passion!"

The guy wasn't angry. In fact, he was...happy? Don't tell me he was like Darkness? The kind who *enjoyed* being hit?

"Um," Erika said. "Um, um... He looks a little...funny..."

"Is he what they call...the Big M?" Cielo.

I'd witnessed Darkness's little proclivity so many times that it didn't really shock me, but Erika and Cielo were bowled over. They were more upset than the victim.

"Geez, we can only hope so," I grumbled. "Wait, no! Look at that! His body is...changing color?"

"To use such...such violence against a fan like myself!" the customer cried. He seemed to be inflating. His clothes tore, revealing green skin underneath. A horn grew from his head, and his face changed into something hideous.

"So you're a troll?! A monster in human form?" I said.

"*Troll!* Pfah! I have a name, you know! It's Charlie. And I'm very, very taken with your little friend! Cielo is miiiiine!"

We were way past "obnoxious customer" here! What was a monster doing being a fan of my group anyway?!

Horried by the abrupt appearance of a troll, people started shouting and running. "I-i-it's a monster!" someone cried. "Everybody run!" said someone else. The handshake event descended into panic. Charlie, savoring the terrified spectators, started smashing the stage and sets.

"Hey! He's busting up all our stuff!" I said. "We had a good thing

going, and he's smashing it!"

"No one can have Cielo but me!" Charlie cried, standing possessively in front of her and glowering at the other guests.

Trolls were known for two things: durability and the capacity to heal themselves. Ordinary attacks just won't cut it with them. Yeah... Ordinary attacks wouldn't do...

I activated my Ambush skill and sneaked around behind Cielo. Neither she nor Charlie even knew I was there. I took a deep breath and shouted...

"Sir! You are *making a scene!*"

Startled, Charlie turned toward me. At that exact second, I gave Cielo a push on the back.

Charlie seemed to have a weird idea of what was going on—he was coming in for a hug, looking thrilled.

"Oh—oh—oh—nooooooooooooo!" There came the right straight again, right along with the scream. And the difference in height put Cielo level with a very vulnerable part of Charlie's anatomy.

"Urgh... Hgh... Ngh..." Charlie couldn't quite get a complete sound out as he lay there huddled in a ball.

"Geez!" I muttered, unconsciously putting my own hands protectively over my groin as I felt a chill run down my spine.

"A reward...to be...savored...hrrrgh!" Charlie managed. This would have been the perfect opportunity to finish off an incapacitated troll, but somehow I couldn't bring myself to make the obvious attack of opportunity. Yeah... Maybe I'd let him off this time.

10

A few days after the troll incident in the capital, I was drowning my sorrows at the tavern in Axel.

"Hooah! Pardon me, I need another bubbly!"

Megumin, sitting across the table from me, stared at me silently.

"What's your problem, Megumin? Stop looking at me like I'm, you know, pitiful."

I wished she would stop looking down on me. Whose fault was it that I had to go through all this pain anyway?

"You *are* pitiful, so I don't think there's much she can do. It's too bad—your little tour was going so well," Aqua said. She was mocking me! Like she wasn't just as screwed as I was if we didn't pay off that debt!

"It's great you were able to drive off that troll, but it sounds like he left the capital's theater pretty much a wreck... And as the event promoter, you're on the hook to pay them back a whole bunch of money. Talk about your bad luck, Kazuma," Darkness said.

“That’s not even the worst of it! We ended up having to cancel the second day’s performance, which means people wanted their money back! And now we’ve got tons of unsold merch taking up space... I’m hemorrhaging money on this! *Hemorrhaging!*”

“I knew all along. I knew that when you get like this, Kazuma, nothing good ever comes of it! I tried and tried to tell you, but when you get those eris signs in your eyes, you absolutely refuse to listen to me!”

Gah! Hell of a time for Aqua to start talking like a grown-up. Now I sounded like the bad guy somehow! Admittedly...I did maybe have some lessons to learn here.

“All right, Aqua, that’s enough. Kazuma was just doing it to help those dancers. I’m sure the desire for personal profit had nothing to do with it. Right, Kazuma?” Darkness asked.

“U-uh, yeah, of course,” I said, but I couldn’t quite meet her eyes.

No! Don’t look at me so compassionately!

“Kazuma, are you tearing up?” Megumin asked, getting up from her chair and walking around just so she could look me in the eyes.

I pressed my hands to my face, trying to brush the tears away, when I was surprised by a voice behind me.

“Pardon me. I just heard you say ‘Kazuma’... You wouldn’t happen to be Kazuma Sato, would you? May I have a moment?”

I turned around to see an older gentleman standing there. He was dressed in clothes that suggested he had way more money than the average patron of a dive like this.

“Er, yeah. I’m Kazuma. Can I help you...?”

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance. I’m the manager of the theater here in Axel.”

My pain-in-the-ass sense was tingling. Don’t tell me there’d been damage to the local theater, too.

I was definitely worried as the guy started to explain what he was after.

11

“You want to hire us, sir?”

The moment the manager had finished talking, I’d called the Axel Hearts to the tavern. Once they were all there, I gave them the lowdown, which brought us to this moment.

“He says he saw your show in the capital, and that’s what got him interested,” I said.

“Just so. It was terrible about your handshake event—but the show itself was really quite wonderful. It would be such a shame for you to simply disappear now. I know my venue isn’t as glamorous as

some of the places you've visited, but might you consider gracing my stage with your performance?" The gentleman smiled softly.

"That's... That's more than we could hope for. We should be asking you to let us perform!" Lia said.

"I-I'll try very hard not to go berserk," Cielo added. "I look forward to working with you!"

"Thanks so much, Gramps! I promise you a free autograph!"

"Hoh-hoh. Wonderful! In that case, I'll come by with an official contract later. It's my pleasure to be working with you young ladies."

Well, good first meeting. The girls all seemed to be on board, and that was what counted.

"You really did it!" Aqua exclaimed. "All your hard work is paying off!"

"Aw, don't sound so shocked. They had tons of fans. Lia and her friends put on a heck of a show," I said. Hey, they'd practically made me a fan, and I was only supposed to be in it for the money.

"Thank you... It's a wonderful feeling to know that people see us as real dancers," said Lia. "Now we can keep performing. We can do our show together!"

"Me... I started this as a way to practice getting over my fear of men, but now I enjoy the dancing more than anything," Cielo said.

"Yeah, me too!" Erika chimed in. "It takes all three of us to make the Axel Hearts! Whenever we show up onstage, it'll be together!"

These three really got along well. This seemed like a good time to ask a question that had been on my mind for a while now. "You know, I've heard Cielo's and Erika's stories, but why did you decide to become a dancer, Lia?"

"That's...my secret. Hee-hee!" she said.

I gave her a questioning look. Well, it was all right. It would only poison things between us if I pressed too hard about it. "Okay," I said. "Anyway. Cielo, Erika. I look forward to continuing to work with you!"

"Yeah! Ah, friendship is beautiful! Even if that's all we got out of our tour, it was still worth it. So chin up, huh, Kazuma?"

"Yeah, you're right..."

Wait! No, she wasn't! I was in even more debt than before! And friendship wouldn't earn me one cold eris! That was an idea—maybe I should ask that manager for a finder's fee or something. I'd gotten this group off the ground; I should hurry and set up some kind of system where the money would come rolling in every month without me having to do anything!

"I know that look, Kazuma. That's your I'm-having-a-nasty-idea face. I can't trust you farther than I can throw you..." Aqua said.

My thinking was interrupted by someone shouting, "Yo, Kazuma!"

Look at you, having a party with all these cute girls, and it's hardly noon! Man, that's the life!"

I looked up to see a very familiar drunk. "Screw you, Dust. I'm a busy guy; I don't have time to entertain you." Dust came over one stumbling step at a time; I gave him a go-away wave.

"Aw, how can you be so cruel? You an' me, we're friends, right? Hey, I heard some story. Word is *this* time you smashed up the capital's theater!"

"*This* time?" asked Cielo, looking worried. Great timing, Dust!

"Dust! That's enough out of you!" I moved to clap my hand over his mouth, but Erika and Lia sensed that something was going on and grabbed my shoulders, stopping me.

"Ha-ha-ha! Yeah, can't take my eyes off you for a second! What, wasn't it enough for you, blowing up that performing troupe's wagon? Didn't they turn out to be, like, dancers or something? And all their stuff got exploded because *you* said to...? And now a whole theater in the capital? Hey, what've you got against the performing arts?"

"Dancers? Dancers who got all their stuff blown up?" Cielo, usually so meek and mild, fixed Megumin and me with a very cold stare.

Shit, this was getting out of hand. I looked to Megumin for help, but she'd pulled the brim of her hat way down over her eyes. "Huh! I just realized I forgot to feed Chomusuke today! Kazuma, I think I had better go!"

D-damn! She was going to leave me high and dry!

"I tell you, a guy who's taken out a whole bunch of the Demon King's generals sure does things differen— Huh? What's wrong, Kazuma? You look like you've seen a ghost. Aw, whatever. Hey, ladies, where y'all from?"

Dust was the only one who failed to see what was going on here. Instead, he was trying to pick up the girls with an enthusiasm only a drunk could muster.

"We're from the wagon you just mentioned. The one that got blown up with all our stuff. *We're* the dancers," Lia said.

"Uh... Did I just say something I shouldn't have? Ha... Ah-ha-ha... Hey! I just remembered a, uh, thing I gotta do! See ya!"

Nice of him to finally figure it out. I could see Dust start to sweat, and then he began backing away. I looked around and realized Aqua and Darkness had escaped to a corner of the tavern, too!

I didn't say anything.

Erika said, "Kazuma, did you really destroy our stuff? I'd like to get the story here. Think you could have a seat?"

"C'mon, Erika... People won't think you're cute if you go around scowling like that," I said. "Hey... It looks like you're *all* a little

upset.”

Even Erika wasn't going to be swayed by the “cute” card today. She looked as furious as a devil. Lia and Cielo moved to surround me.

“Shut up and sit down,” Lia said softly.

“Yes'm!” I said. Who knew she could growl like that?

“You're awful... We trusted you!” Cielo said, looking like she might burst into tears. *Please don't. That's my biggest weakness!*

“It's not like that,” I said. “I swear, there's a really complicated story here...”

“Story? The *story* is that you used us to try to make money to pay off *your* debts,” Lia said.

“Well, uh, that's not technically *wrong*...” I was desperately trying to think of something I could say to make them see things my way, but I wasn't coming up with any way to talk myself out of this situation.

“I know you had debts to deal with, Kazuma. Your hands were sort of tied. And it's true that you made us more well-known and popular. Maybe we could call this water under the bridge,” Erika said.

“E-Erika...,” I breathed.

“Huh! Is that what you were hoping I would say?! You've got some nerve, acting like you're the victim when it's you who did all the damage! You could at least *act* sorry!”

“I'm so sorry!” I said, prostrating myself and grinding my face into the floor. But it didn't stop the torrent of abuse.

“*Sigh*,” I heard Aqua say. “That Kazuma... You reap what you sow. Maybe tomorrow our usual party can find a nice quest to go on.”

“Yeah, no kidding,” Darkness agreed. “Still, seeing him on the floor, with those girls spitting on him... I'm a little jealous...”

Great stuff from my “friends” who had run away at the first sign of trouble! Not like I was in any position to criticize them, though. Ugh, how had this happened? And now my debt was up to 570 million! When would I ever be free?!

Chapter Three

1

The day after the Axel Hearts had washed their hands of me, I was still in the tavern, drinking.

“How ’m I supposed to survive if I don’t drink?! My debts are snowballing, and I can’t seem to make a dent in them! Argh! I can’t stand this!”

“Aw, it’s all right. We’re always in debt!”

“Aqua is right. We are old hands at owing crushing amounts of money.”

Aqua and Megumin seemed to think they were making me feel better, but as gentle as their tone was, the words coming out of their mouths were no help at all.

“*You’re* the main reasons I’m always in debt! Say it! Let’s review out loud the causes of my most recent financial debacles!” I smacked the table and leaned toward them, but they both went quiet and refused to meet my eyes.

“It sounds like life has been most difficult for you.”

“I’m sorry to hear about all your trouble, Kazuma.”

I turned toward the expressions of sympathy to find the masked devil, Vanir, and the magic shop owner, Wiz. They were both former generals of the Demon King, but now they ran a magic shop in Axel. Vanir was an all-seeing devil who (he claimed) might well be more powerful than the Demon King himself, while Wiz was friendly and pretty and also a Lich, one of the “kings of the undead.” You had to wonder what they were doing running a shop in the beginner town. Both of them were powerful enough to have much better, easier ways of making money.

“Don’t see the two of you much around the tavern,” I said.

“Bwah-ha-ha-ha-ha! I was looking for you, m’boy, and a certain street-punk adventurer told me you were here,” Vanir said.

“I was just out for a walk,” said Wiz.

The street punk would be Dust. Oh yeah—he’d been drinking here just like me until a few minutes ago.

“You need something, Vanir?” I asked. (But only after giving Aqua a glass of bubbly to stop her from trying to attack the devil, which she

did the minute she saw him.)

Vanir looked at me, and I could tell his face was terrible to behold even with that mask. “What do you mean, *valued customer*? The day has come to pay for the idol merch you recently ordered in such gratuitous quantities—on credit. Surely you haven’t forgotten?”

“We worked for three days and three nights with no rest for that merchandise,” Wiz said. “I haven’t crunched like that in ages! How much were you able to sell?”

I *had* forgotten. All about it. Shit, what was I gonna do?! Forget breaking even—I’d lost money on all this!

“With this payment, I think I might just allow you *two* full meals a day! And perhaps even a side dish to go with!” Vanir said.

“You mean it?! I’ll finally be free of living on a single slice of stale bread each day?”

I had some questions about Wiz’s diet. He could at least let her have a side dish! But anyway, this was no time to be feeling sympathy pangs. I should be worrying about my personal safety, not Wiz’s nutrition intake. I was trying desperately to think of some way out of this situation when the tavern door opened with a bang.

A young guy rushed in and said breathlessly, “A-awful news! Some nutcase named Charlie is going berserk at the theater! The dancers! They—”

“Do you think that’s the same guy you told us about, Kazuma?! Lia and the others could be in danger!” Aqua drained her bubbly in a single gulp and jumped to her feet.

Charlie? Oh yeah, that name did sound vaguely familiar... No! Yes! This was the perfect chance to make my escape from any follow-up questions from Vanir.

“All right, thinking later. Running now!” I said, and then I gathered up my party members—who’d been acting like they didn’t know me since the question of payment came up—and hauled ass out of the tavern.

2

I shoved my way past the flood of people trying to flee the theater, where I found the Axel Hearts staring down a guy I thought I recognized. The bulk. The brawn. Oh! *Charlie*! Like, Charlie! That guy!

“Y-you just keep your distance, Mr. Troll, or I’ll hit you with my very most powerful magic!” Cielo said.

“I’m not just a *troll*, I’m *Charlie*! Please, my sweet Cielo, don’t be afraid to use my name!”

“Why are you always coming to our shows?” Erika demanded. “Is it because I’m so cute? O gods, is this my curse for being *just too*

cute?!"

"Who're you? I can't see Cielo. Outta the way!"

"Ooh, what's your problem? Now I'm mad!" Erika stomped on the ground, furious that Charlie would ignore her. It was pretty obvious that this guy was a Cielo stan. And there was nothing worse than a crazed fan who also happened to be ridiculously strong.

"I have to admit, I thought they would be acting more cornered than this. They kind of look like they can handle themselves," Aqua said. She wasn't wrong—the girls didn't seem especially nervous. Nonetheless, I couldn't just stand by and watch.

"Lia! Cielo! Erika! Are you okay?" I called.

"Kazuma! Everyone!" Lia looked at us, visibly relieved.

"Looks like we made it in time. Thank goodness you're all safe," Aqua said.

"That's the troll we went at it with in the capital, right?!" I said, pointing. Charlie leered at me.

"Oh, Kazuma, do you know him?" Aqua asked. Oh yeah—she'd never met him before.

"You did a real number on that theater, you jerk! Thanks to you, I'm even deeper in debt than I was before! What do you plan to do about it? Get ready, 'cause we're gonna settle this right here!"

"You're the one who'd better get ready. I'm taking the dancers with me, whether you like it or not. Lord Daniel's orders shall not be defied! Rrrahhhh!" As he roared, Charlie's skin turned green, and he got bigger and bigger...

"Did he say Daniel? That's what he said, right? He couldn't possibly mean..."

Ack! Wiz was here? But what about Vanir? ...Didn't see him anywhere.

"Don't just stand there, Wiz! Here he comes!" I shouted.

"Grrraaahhh! I'm taking Cielo and the others, and there's nothing you can do about it!"

Darkness and I faced down Charlie with our weapons at the ready. "Sorry, sir, but there's no touching allowed here!" I said. "If you cause any more trouble for these girls...we'll have to forcibly eject you from the premises!"

"I'd like to see you try, humans! You can't even scratch me!" So our troublesome troll's confidence was undiminished. Last time I had been able to deal with him, just, because I'd had the element of surprise and had been able to line up Cielo's critical hit on his family jewels. I didn't think the same thing would work twice.

Charlie obviously remembered, because he was using his left hand to guard his most precious possessions and giving Cielo a wide berth. I knew my sword and arrows wouldn't get through that thick armor of

fat. If I was looking to one-hit him, Megumin would be my best option...

I glanced over to find my wizard breathing hard, her eyes shining. "I can hit him, can't I?! I can go ahead and drop an explosion on him?!"

"Of course you can't do that! You'd take out this entire theater—and everyone in it! We'd only end up even deeper in debt!" It was true, though, that with a troll's profound fortitude, we were going to need something that would land good and hard. "All right, what we need here is a good old-fashioned frontal attack! Wiz, you're up."

"Wh-who, me?! I am?! Wouldn't you normally save your own friends?"

"No worries. It's not the fight itself that matters, it's the result. If everyone gets out alive, and no one is hurt, who cares how we get there? Oh, but try not to bust up the theater too bad!"

"I... I'll see what I can do..."

I gave Wiz my most beseeching bow of the head, and she sort of got swept along by it. Anyway, she agreed. She's a sucker if you really beg.

"Not gonna fight me yourself? You gonna hide behind that old hag with her plump ass? Hey, if you're gonna go to the trouble, you oughtta at least go for sweet young things like Cielo here."

"I'm sorry... What did you just say?"

"Uh, Wiz?" I ventured. Then I took a step back. She was looking up at Charlie, her shoulders shaking, radiating a distinct urge to kill.

"I'm sayin' that if you're gonna chase some tail, it might as well belong to a cute young thing like Cielo. Not some homely mule who can't even be bothered to show some skin, or—"

"Cursed Lightning!"

Before Charlie could finish talking, Wiz unleashed a bolt of blue lightning on him.

"Hrrragggghhh!" He thrashed wildly, then collapsed to one knee, the weapon dropping from his hand. His scorched skin gave off an actually pretty tasty aroma of cooked meat. "Grr! How dare you do that to me—a Troll Elite! I'm outta here, but that doesn't mean you've won! Lord Daniel will hear about this—don't think he won't!"

"Do you mean Daniel as in Daniel the Troll Lord?!" Wiz demanded, and Charlie stopped short.

"Shit, you know him? Yes! The very same Lord Daniel! When his wrath is roused... Well...it won't be pretty, I promise!"

With that parting shot, Charlie smashed through a wall of the theater and ran off. Dammit! He and his taste for wanton destruction! That wall was going to go on my tab!

"He got away," Megumin said. "He's quite nimble for someone so

large. Wiz... Do you perhaps know that troll?"

Wiz had her head cocked, thinking about something. As for me, I had the same question as Megumin.

"No, Miss Megumin, I'm afraid I don't. But this Daniel he mentioned—I knew him a long time ago."

"Again!" Aqua broke in, rounding on Wiz. "Somehow you always seem to have some dark connection to our worst enemies!"

"I-it's not what you think, Lady Aqua! This was ages ago! I don't have anything to do with him these days..."

"Huh! You don't know when to quit, do you, you Lichy spy?! This time, I'll purify you for good! Get ready to—"

"Dammit, we're trying to talk here!" I bopped Aqua on the head for being completely unhelpful.

"Ow, that hurt! Kazuma hit me!"

"So anyway, who's this Daniel guy? If he's just this troll's, like, gang boss or whatever, he doesn't sound like such a big deal," I said.

"I'm afraid it's worse than you think. Daniel used to be part of the Demon King's army. Even back then, people talked about how strong he was."

"The D-Demon King's army?!" Them again! And here I thought I was just dealing with an obnoxious troll.

"That's right. He was so powerful that his name was floated several times as a possible candidate for general."

So he was as strong as the generals of the Demon King? Hey, now! That was the kind of enemy who sounded downright dangerous! Too dangerous!

"What does someone like him want with girls like us? And especially Cielo?" Lia asked. I had the same question. I'd sure never imagined that these dancers would find themselves in the crosshairs of the Demon King's generals.

"It wasn't just me! Charlie said he was going to take all three of us to his castle!" Cielo objected.

So a near general of the Demon King had his eye on the Axel Hearts? I couldn't pretend it made much sense, but it definitely sounded like a lot of trouble.

"Hey, it's okay!" Erika said. "If this Daniel guy shows up, we'll just send him packing—together! Right, Kazuma?"

"Good luck, girls! Great work today! See ya!"

"Hey, where do you think you're going?!"

I'd been trying to exit stage left, so to speak, but Erika grabbed me by the collar before I could get away. Man! I didn't want to get sucked into any more trouble!

"I'm afraid you're not talking sense," I said obsequiously. "I'm just an ordinary adventurer. Besides, my heart may be with you, but we're

walking different paths in life at the moment..." I struggled to escape, but Lia and Cielo cornered me, too.

"This troll, Daniel," Megumin said to Wiz. "You said he is no longer part of the Demon King's army, yes? Why not? Why would they let go of someone so formidable?"

If you have time to ask questions, you have time to help me!

"He's very strong, yes... But Daniel also loves dancing girls more than anyone in the world," Wiz said.

"Whazzat?" I asked. Was it just me, or was that pretty unexpected?

"He routinely ignored the Demon King's orders, chasing after dancers instead of doing his work. I guess it happened one too many times, and they kicked him out..."

"He's nothing but an idol otaku!" I exclaimed. This guy sounded even worse than that troll we'd been dealing with! Not just because he was strong—because as a fan slash customer, he was even more obnoxious.

"So he's as powerful as a general of the Demon King's army, and even his minions are majorly strong. This is one fan who sounds like a lot of trouble," Erika said. "This is all because I'm so cute, isn't it?! Oh! The curse of loveliness that can beguile even an almost general of the Demon King!"

I thought Erika's sense of danger needed some fine-tuning. The least I could do was give her a warning. I said, "Optimism like that is for people who aren't paying enough attention. You're all adventurers. Look out for yourselves."

"Wha—? You... You're not going to protect us? But you're our producer, Kazuma," Cielo said.

Huh?! Sorry, Cielo, but the puppy dog eyes won't work on me. I'm not your producer anymore—because you all freaking fired me!

"That was my *old* job! Now I'm busy trying to pay off my debts. I don't have time to mess around with you three!"

"So this is how you treat us the minute it's not your job anymore... I guess we shouldn't be surprised to get that from Cad-zuma."

"Don't call a guy a cad. I have feelings, you know."

If I had to face down someone as strong as a general of the Demon King, it wouldn't matter if I had nine lives or ninety-nine. I had to take care of more immediate problems—my debts!

I was slumped on the table at the tavern as usual, weeping into one of my plethora of empty mugs. "Ugh... I can't stand this anymore..."

“How long do you plan to drink and sulk? Not that I can’t understand the lack of motivation that comes with your ever-spiraling debt,” Megumin said.

“That’s not what I mean! I mean, somehow I’ve got *another* Demon King—general-level enemy! Ugh! Is there no god in this world?!”

“How about a goddess? At your service,” Aqua said, smiling beatifically. I looked her right in the eye...and sighed dramatically.

“I see... No god, no goddess... Just this worthless excuse for a deity.”

“How dare you keep saying that! I’ll show you who’s worthless!” She was yammering right in my ear. I grabbed her cheeks and pulled. “Owth! Owie! Thop that!”

They stretched a surprisingly long way.

“Stop,” Darkness instructed. “We’re facing a major foe. This is no time to be fighting among ourselves. If this Daniel is strong enough to be a general of the Demon King, then as a Crusader, I have a duty to protect the people from him, even if it means putting my own life on the line. If he wants to carry off Lia and the others, then let me be carried off instead! Let me be taken to his castle, where he’ll tear off my armor piece by piece, and then when I’m defenseless and helpless —”

Darkness was good and lost in her little fantasy.

“Hngh! I don’t want to go... But I must! I have no choice!”

“Haaah, ha-ha-ha-ha! I do not care if he is a would-be general of the Demon King or what—I will eliminate him with my explosion!”

Did I have *anyone* around me in their right mind? Hmm. But you know what? This Daniel guy was really after the Axel Hearts. This didn’t have anything to do with me, so as long as I didn’t stick my neck out, I wouldn’t have any trouble. Yeah. For once, I could just be a spectator. A nice, safe spectator.

“Huh! Lively bunch, as usual.”

I was holding my head and groaning when I heard the voice of yet another unwelcome visitor.

“Oh, hey, Dust. Hey, Rin,” Aqua said. I looked up to see the punk adventurer, Dust, along with his party’s only female member, the wizard Rin.

“Please, I’m sick of trouble. Rin, can’t you keep Dust on his leash?”

“I ain’t even said anything yet! Hey, you don’t look so good. Screwed up again, huh?”

“Leave me alone. Shoo! Shoo!” I didn’t even look at Dust as I waved him away, but he ignored me anyway, sitting down next to me.

“Bull’s-eye, huh? Ha-ha! That explains the long face. Well, I’ve got a proposition that’ll cheer you right up.”

Dust's "propositions" always fell into two categories: the ones with some seamy backstory and the ones that were going to fail. It wasn't even worth listening to him.

"Sorry, man. I've got too many thoughts in my head to cheer up just like that."

"Gee, I'd think the news that a bunch of sexy ladies are about to show a whole bunch of skin would cheer any guy up."

Now I looked at him, peering into the face of my dear, true friend. "Dust. Details. Now."

"The kingdom of Belzerg is going to hold a dance contest?!" I was leaning over the table toward him; I couldn't help myself.

"Yeah! It's a contest to find the best dancing group in the country. And since this is the hundredth time they're doing it, it's gonna be even wilder than usual!"

I looked at Rin—I didn't trust Dust's word alone—and she gave me a big nod. "Elroad's even promised special support," she said. "With the contract money and everything else, the prize pot is supposed to be a billion eris."

"A b-b—"

""""Billion?!"""" Aqua and the others all exclaimed at once. My own amazed noises were lost in the shout.

"There's lots of applicants, so they're gonna do prelims here in Axel before the main event at the capital," said Dust. "Let's have us a nice drink with a side of watching pretty girls dance!"

"That's it!" I said.

"Uh? What's it?"

"Yes! That's *it*! This is the perfect, unmissable chance to turn everything around!" Luck was on my side now, and it was going to help me pay off my debts! I was clenching my fist and shouting in triumph, but for some reason Aqua and the group were giving me hard looks. Well, see if I gave them one single solitary eris when I was rich and famous! "Mwah-ha-ha-ha-ha! There's that motivation I was missing! The Axel Hearts and I are going to take that billion eris!"

"The Axel Hearts? They're those dancers everyone's been talking about recently, right?" said Rin. "I don't know what your connection is with them, but I don't think they're going to have it easy in this contest. Even the chances of getting through the prelims are minuscule."

Aw, Rin, don't rain on my parade! I don't want to know about any sobering realities!

"Gonna be a tough crowd, huh, Kazuma? Too bad for you."

"Hey! I've got it!" Aqua, who had been uncharacteristically quiet and thoughtful, suddenly clapped her hands like she'd had some kind

of idea. Whatever it was, I was sure it was bad news. "We don't need Lia and the others to win this!"

"What do you mean?" I said.

"We just enter a goddess in the contest—namely me—and that money's as good as ours! I'll blow through prelims and the main event and take that prize pot. My one condition is that after our debts are paid off, I get to keep whatever's left over."

"Sorry to burst your bubble when you're so excited about...being a goddess or whatever? But entries are limited to crews of at least three people," Dust said.

Aqua, though, pointed to herself, Megumin, and Darkness in turn. "Well, that's perfect. There's three of us here. This victory is ours!"

"The Crimson Magic Clan's foremost wizard, onstage in a contest? Truly, this is the destiny the world has had in store for me!"

"Just imagine—the hot breath filling the theater! The judges' gazes, practically eating you up! Unngh, I'm growing hot just thinking about it!"

The victory was as good as theirs, huh? All I saw was the usual useless goddess, crazy loli girl, and masochist Crusader.

"Oh, you're all gonna be there, too? I'd like to say fat chance—but you all at least have your looks going for you, if nothing else. This might actually work," Dust said. And then I realized. He was right: It tended to slip my mind, but these girls were pretty, at least. There were possibilities here... Maybe.

"All right, I'll be producer for you three while I'm at it! I've got high hopes for you, you hear?"

""""Yes, Mr. Producer!""""

With that kind of enthusiasm, I might just be able to turn this thing around. Still, these three were just insurance. Lia and the Axel Hearts were the main act, no question. Maybe I should ask if they wanted me to come back and be their producer again.

Just watch me, Axel Hearts! With you on my side, this time I'm going to pay off my debts and be a free man!

"Uh-oh. Kazuma's got that nasty look on his face again," Aqua said.

I had a skip in my step as, brilliant idea in hand, I headed to the Hearts' house to ask them to tackle the contest with me.

I never got there—I thought better of it on the way. Instead, early this morning I headed to Axel's little theater, where I knew Lia and the others would come to practice. And I'd been hard at work ever since I arrived...

“Is this...is this really our theater?” Lia breathed.

“Wow! Everything’s been polished to perfection. Who knew even the mic could sparkle like this?” Erika said.

“There isn’t a speck of dust anywhere, not even in the hard-to-reach places like behind the lights. Who in the world could have made it so clean?” Cielo wondered.

I observed their amazement from the wings of the stage. They were good and impressed—now was the moment.

“Heh-heh-heh! You like it?” I asked, emerging from my hiding place. I had a towel wrapped around my head, with a cleaning rag in one hand and a bucket in the other. I couldn’t make it any more obvious that I’d been cleaning right up to that very moment.

“Did you do all this, Kazuma?” Lia said. “What’s come over you? Don’t tell me this is another one of your little schemes...” Her face held a mixture of gratitude and astonishment, but there was deep mistrust in her eyes. Erika and Cielo both looked even more dubious about this. Fair enough; I couldn’t expect them not to question me. But I hadn’t yet delivered the coup de grâce.

“Schemes? Perish the thought! It’s just the opposite—I wanted to apologize for all the terrible things I did to you before! I’m so very sorry!” I flung myself forward, practically sliding into an abject prostration.

“K-Kazuma! You don’t have to grind your forehead into the dirt! Here, get up...”

“No, I *must* do this, or I won’t feel I’ve atoned! I may have felt I had my reasons, but that doesn’t change the fact that I used you purely for business!” I turned toward Cielo, who seemed like the easiest touch of them all, and waved my hands in a show of sincerity and apology. Emphasis on *show*.

“Kazuma...” Even Erika started to soften when she saw me. Great. One more push.

“That’s why, this time, I really and truly want to cheer you on as I help your dream of becoming dancers come true. Please, give me another chance!” I said.

Lia placed a hand on my shoulder and smiled kindly. “Really, get up. You don’t have to apologize anymore. What’s done is done.”

“You really did help get our name out there, after all,” Erika added. “We’re grateful to you for that.”

“You’re not the only one who’s not in it for the money. You’ll really be in our corner?” Cielo asked.

I let them urge me to my feet. As I got up, I wiped away tears...or at least pretended to. This was it! I had them!

“Aw, you girls...,” I said. “Well, all right, then!”

“Yeah! It’s good to be working with you again, Mr. Producer,” Lia

said. I gave her and Erika vigorous handshakes. I was about to give one to Cielo, too, but stopped myself just in time.

"We can do this—together!" I proclaimed. This had gone even better than I'd expected. Now all I had to do was help the Axel Hearts win the contest, and that billion-eris prize was as good as mine. Good-bye, debts! "For my first official act as your producer, might I suggest appearing in a contest?"

"A contest? You mean, like the one that's going to have prelims in Axel soon?"

"The very same! If you win, everyone in the country will know about the Axel Hearts!"

The girls looked at one another, considering my suggestion. Whether they agreed would change the course of all our lives. I *had* to get them to join this contest, whatever it took.

"Do you really think we could do it?" Lia asked. "It sounds like there are going to be some pretty serious acts on that stage..."

"Aw, what are you, scared? This is the perfect chance to prove we're the cutest ones in the capital!" Erika replied. "If I get onstage in the capital city, then I'm sure...!"

"Y-yes, Erika's right. Let's put on the very best show we can!" said Cielo.

After a second, Lia said, "Well, all right, if you both say so. We'll perform the best we know how."

This was going so smoothly that I was starting to get nervous. I couldn't back out now, though. I had to charge ahead!

"Let's have a quick look at the process, just so we all know what'll happen," I said. "Like you said, to reach the big day in the capital, you have to make it through regional prelims in Axel first. The first round of prelims involves a conversation with the judges. The second round is a test of strength, the third is a test of intelligence, and then finally you do a performance... Huh!"

So there would be four whole rounds of sifting through contestants before we even left Axel. Even knowing I had Aqua and the others as backup, I could see the chances were slim.

My hopes are riding on you, Axel Hearts!

5

"Thank you all for your patience, everyone!" said a tuxedoed MC. "The preliminary round to determine who will go on to the dancing contest will now begin!" The crowd broke into cheers.

When we arrived on the day of the competition, we found way more contestants and way more audience members than I had expected gathered at the outdoor stage.

I could hear members of the audience:

“Hoo! I’ve been waiting for this! Think there’ll be a swimsuit competition?”

“I heard there’s going to be a goddess participating. And I shall be here to cheer her on with all my might!”

Wait, those weren’t just any audience members. That was Dust and Mitsurugi. One of them was here for some skin, and the other was here for...well, Aqua.

“The first round of preliminaries is intended to ensure our dancers possess the necessary charm! If the group I call would please step forward...”

“Wonder if they’re really going to be okay,” I mumbled. “Somehow, *I’m* the one feeling nervous today!”

I didn’t mean the Axel Hearts—they’d been onstage a million times, and I figured they could take the pressure. I was worried about my other group. They had Aqua the born troublemaker and Megumin the explosioneer. When Darkness looked like the sanest person in your group, you knew you were in trouble. I couldn’t get over my anxiety that they would do something...well, bad.

The contest went on, my worries notwithstanding, and finally it was their turn.

“Ahem. Next we have the trio of Explosion Goddess Lalatina. Please step up to the judges’ table!”

“Pbbt! What the hell kind of name is that?!”

“Aw, geez! That’s disgusting!” Dust exclaimed. I’d spat out my drink in sheer shock and landed a direct hit on the back of his head. I guess he wasn’t happy about it, but I had bigger problems.

“Aqua, where the hell did you get that name?!” I demanded.

“Hee-hee! I came up with it myself. Pretty great, huh? I combined all of our best features!” So she was behind this.

“Yes, it’s excellent! Fine work, Aqua; I am very satisfied!” said Megumin. If she’d been in a normal state of mind, I would have expected her to object, but I guess her Crimson Magic Clan sense kicked in, and she thought it sounded great.

“A few questions, then,” the MC said. “We can’t wait to hear your answers, Explosion Goddess Lalatina!”

“D-don’t call me Lalatina!” exclaimed a red-faced Lalatina—er, I mean, Darkness.

“Hmm, if I might venture a question?” said one of the judges, stroking his beard. “What made you decide to take part in this contest?” They were asking everyone that.

“I admit, as a member of the nobility, I hesitated to do this. But I couldn’t ignore my friends’ request!” Darkness said.

“For me, it is quite simple: The slumbering genius for dancing

which has lain dormant within me all this time is finally awakening. I swear on the pride of the Crimson Magic Clan, I will seize the hearts of the populace!" (You can guess who said that.)

"My reason's simple, too: Because I'm a goddess, of course. I can't let anyone outshine me!"

"Woool! That's my lady! I'll follow you my whole life long!"

Aqua's explanation had really worked for at least one audience member. I was trying to keep my distance from him—I wouldn't want anyone to think I knew him.

"It sounds like you have quite a passionate fan out there," the judge said. "Is he someone you know?"

He and Aqua both looked at Mitsurugi. She squinted, studying him, then shook her head. "No, I've never seen him before. But thanks for rooting for me, stranger!"

"Lady Aqua?!"

Oops. He collapsed from the shock.

"A goddess, a *chuuni*, and a noble... That's a pretty deep roster of character types! Quite a clever concept for your group," a judge proclaimed. Japanese TV would have loved them...as a comedy-variety act.

"It's not just a concept! I really am a goddess!"

"That is amazing commitment to your character! All right, then! Think you could do something goddess-y for us?"

"I don't mind if I do. I'll prove to you that this is more than an act! Since I've got this fantastic audience... I know! *The Wonders of Nature!*"

It was her standard party trick, but it set the judges chattering. "My goodness! She did some sort of water trick to produce a rainbow! The audience is enthralled! Explosion Goddess Lalatina, you pass the first round!"

"That's great and all," I muttered, "but are we sure about these judges?"

6

One group after another came forward and tried to prove how wonderful they were. It went quicker than I'd expected, and before I knew it, it was time for my main girls, the Axel Hearts, to take the stage.

"The next group will be our last contestants. Ladies of the Axel Hearts, if you'd be so kind as to stand before the judges!"

"The people asked about me! And Cielo gives the people what they want!"

"She's cool on the outside and hot on the inside! Lia's here to take

your breath away!”

“We’re the world’s most comely collection of cuties! Loveliness one thousand percent! I’m Erika! And together we’re—”

“—the Axel Hearts!””

Repetition really was key. They’d been too shy to do the self-intro effectively at first, but they’d learned how to really lean into it.

“Way to go, Axel Hearts!” someone shouted. “You’re the best, Lia—as usual!”

“I think you mean Erika! She’s the cutest! By definition!”

“Hit us again, Cielo! Pretty please!”

Those were some hard-core fans. At least one of them sounded like trouble in the making. But anyway, forget that. The Hearts were getting more cheers than anyone else.

“You’re awfully popular,” the judge remarked. “Well then, if I may? Perhaps you could tell us why you decided to take part in this contest.”

“Why?” Lia said, her voice carrying around the whole area. “No big reason. We just want our singing and dancing to reach as many people as possible. That’s all!”

“A simple reason—but there’s beauty in simplicity,” the judge said.

“And I have to get my cuteness out there!” said Erika.

“We have faith that when people see our song and dance, it’ll hit them right in the heart! So let us show you what we can do!” Cielo exclaimed. She’d really found her nerve. She’d always been stuttering and hesitant before. I nodded to myself in satisfaction to see the three of them so grown-up.

Dust turned in his spot ahead of me and said, “Kazuma, you’re actin’ almost like you’re the one who helped them grow so much.” He didn’t sound very impressed.

“That’s because I am! My guidance led to that maturity!” It wouldn’t be going too far to say that it was only thanks to me that the girls had gained so much maturity.

“Such purity of heart!” the judge said. “I’m more than happy to pass you through the first round!”

The Axel Hearts grinned at one another, joined hands, and skipped around the stage.

When the judging was over, Aqua, Megumin, Darkness, and the Axel Hearts all came over to me.

“We made it through the first round!” Lia said.

“Well, don’t get complacent! This is where the real work begins.

But...I suppose you do deserve a word of congratulations,” I replied. I could hardly complain; they’d passed the first round with flying colors. But I couldn’t have them feeling too proud of themselves—it would cause them to stop working for it.

“Heh-heh! And we passed, too, thanks to having a goddess on board!” Aqua was on her high horse, but I didn’t think she and the others would listen to me anyway, so I would just let them do whatever they wanted.

“I’m real happy, but we have to keep our sights on what comes next! The second round is a test of strength, the third is about wits, and then there’s the final round... We’ve got a long way to go still!” Erika said. I didn’t even have to press the point; she was keeping everyone on task for me.

“The final round involves singing and dancing, right? We should think of a dance routine right now! My Crimson Magic blood is hot!” Megumin said.

“Just leave the song to me,” said Aqua. “I’ll come up with a tune that would make the child having the biggest tantrum stop crying and put on a smile!”

“Unbelievable... It’s not enough to be exhibited on a stage in a revealing outfit... I’ll be made to shimmy and squirm in front of a bunch of men? I-i-is that what this has come to?!” offered Darkness.

They were really fixated, huh? We didn’t even know if they were going to make it to the final round yet. I wasn’t sure if they had a lot of dancing and singing in them—I was more anxious than expectant. If they made it, I would at least know they were lucky.

Then again, I didn’t care if it was Lia and the Axel Hearts or Aqua and the rest of my party. As long as I got that billion eris and repaid my debts!

I’m trusting you, girls. You’ve got to win this, no matter what!

As the second round started, the audience around me seemed exceptionally rambunctious.

“We’re the ones who are going to win—Explosion Goddess Lalatina!” Aqua said.

“It’s the Axel Hearts who are going to stand on that stage in the capital! So that our singing and dancing can reach as many people as humanly possible!”

They were at one another’s throats, but neither group was actually onstage. They were both in the spectator seating. The second round was a contest of physical strength, and each group had to nominate one person to represent them. The rest were relegated to cheering from the stands. My groups had chosen Darkness and Cielo.

“Hmph! Hmph! Hmph! I could do sit-ups all day!”

“I guess I shouldn’t be surprised, what with you being a Crusader—but you won’t beat me!”

The two of them were doing sit-ups faster than anyone I’d ever seen—and they still had it in them to have a normal conversation at the same time.

“They’ve both done well over a thousand sit-ups, and they still show no sign of slowing down... I almost can’t imagine they’re girls just like me,” Megumin remarked.

“You can’t tell since they’ve got their shirts on, but I’ll bet both of them have six-pack abs! I wouldn’t want to punch *those* stomachs,” Erika agreed.

“Wh-who’s got a six-pack?!” Darkness demanded.

“Yeah! I’m a girl, too, you know! All this talk about tough tummies hits me right where it hurts!” Cielo added.

“The strength contest is in full swing!” the MC announced. “It’s Cielo of the Axel Hearts versus Darkness of Explosion Goddess Lalatina! Which woman will win this showdown of sheer machismo?!”

““Don’t call it that!”” they both shouted.

8

To my surprise, Aqua’s team won the sit-up contest and got through the second round. I was even more shocked when I saw what happened in round three, the contest of wits.

“Contestants, please answer within five seconds. Here’s your question: Called the strongest of all offensive magics—”

“Oh! I know!” Megumin exclaimed before the MC had even finished reading the question.

“Well! We have an eager challenger. Explosion Goddess Lalatina, your answer please!”

“How foolish of you to pose such a question to *me*, of all people! Behold the depth of my Crimsonality, darker than dark and blacker than black! You shall see—”

“I’m sorry, time’s up. You fail.”

“What?!”

Bah. That’s what you get for going way too long on the setup.

“Here comes the question again. Called the strongest of all offensive magics, or sometimes pure parlor trickery, what spell am I thinking of?”

“Um... Oh! Explosion!” Erika said.

“That’s correct! Ten points to the Axel Hearts!”

She was lucky Megumin had monologued herself into the ground.

“That’s *not* correct!” Megumin blustered. “Explosion is not just a parlor trick! I will prove it to you right here and now!” She raised her

staff and started chanting. I guess she really didn't like the answer to that question.

"Oh, shit! Crazy Explosion Girl is about to go off!! Somebody hold her down!" someone shouted. The judges seemed to think Megumin was just staying in character, but every Axel resident in the audience knew better, and they charged the stage, wrenching Megumin's staff away from her.

"Who are you calling crazy?! N-no, stop! Give me back my staff!"

"You must be more popular than I thought to attract a mob of rabid fans like that. But you won't beat me in cuteness!" Erika almost seemed to admire Megumin, but it only inflamed her competitive streak. She had it completely ass-backward, but if it made her work harder, then it was fine by me.

All eyes were on Aqua and her team during the brief scuffle, and I started to find myself feeling the faintest flicker of hope that they might actually win this. Until the MC opened his mouth again.

"And the final group to advance to the last round of judging is... the Axel Heaaaaarts!!"

"No! At the last hurdle—!" Aqua cried.

"It's only natural. I mean, just look how cute I am. Oh! It should be a crime to be this adorable!" said Erika.

"You came close, Aqua, but we'll work hard enough for both our teams," Cielo promised them.

So in the end, the result was...well, the obvious one, I guess. I shouldn't have been surprised.

"No! How could this happen?!"

"Calm down, Aqua. We don't even have any experience as dancers, and we made it this far—is that not a fine result?" Megumin said.

"She's right. Even if it does hurt to lose," Darkness added. Personally, I thought it was a pretty fair outcome. If anything, I thought Aqua and the others had worked really hard.

All right. Mental reset. From here on out, it was Lia and the Axel Hearts all the way!

"Okay, girls, stand proud. You're the best dancers I know. So get out there and earn yourselves a spot on that stage so you can make all your various dreams come true!"

"Th-thank you, Kazuma! I'll give it absolutely everything I've got! So I can get on that stage and someday overcome my fear of men!"

"And I'll stand on the stage in the capital so that Mommy and Daddy can see how cute I am!"

"A-and me, I..." Lia didn't sound quite as charged up as Cielo and Erika.

"Y'know, that's right. I never did hear why Lia became a dancer,"

I said. "Do the two of you know?"

"Why she started dancing? Hmm..., " said Cielo.

"You know, it never really bothered me," said Erika. So even the two people she'd spent the most time with hadn't heard.

Finally Lia said, "The reason I became a dancer is because...the Axel Hearts gave me a home when I found myself with no memories. And—"

"The final round will begin shortly! All remaining contestants, please come to the greenroom behind the stage," the MC said.

"Oops, that time, huh? You girls better get going. You can tell us all about it later, Lia. Can't wait!" I said. I was definitely wondering about her missing her memories and what her motivation could be, but we had to stay focused.

"Yeah," Lia said. "We can talk after the final round. For now, just watch us earn our place on that stage!"

"Knock 'em dead!" I replied.

9

The Axel Hearts danced and sang their hearts out. Then, finally, all the groups had performed, and the only thing left was to find out the results.

"We did all we can do. But was it enough?" Erika wondered aloud.

"The audience seemed really into our performance, but what about the judges?" said Cielo.

The groups who had made it to the final round lined up onstage, where they waited with anxious looks. There was nothing that those of us in the audience, like me, could do now. The best I could offer was a prayer: *Please, please, please!*

"After thorough and careful consideration by the judges, I'm being told we have our result," the MC said. "The judges will now present our winner!"

All of us in the audience and everyone onstage, including the Axel Hearts, looked at the judging panel. You could hear someone swallow heavily.

"Very well," one of the judges said. "The winners of the Axel preliminary round of the dance contest, the ones who will stand onstage in the capital at the main event..."

You're wasting time! Spit it out!

Lia, Erika, and Cielo were pale with anxiety.

"...are the Axel Hearts!!!"

The three of them looked at one another; it seemed like they were going to say something, but they were so overjoyed that they couldn't

get the words out. Instead, they just shared a huge hug.

Excellent! They were in the finals. One step closer to that billion eris... Freedom from debt was within my grasp!

Aqua, Darkness, and Megumin looked almost as pleased as if they had won the contest themselves.

Just as the cheering died down and the arena started to get a little quieter, we heard someone say: “Hoh! Looks like I just missed it. Think of all the dancing girls I could have seen if I’d been just a little more prompt.” It was a man’s voice, weirdly calm. And amid the words, we could hear...

“Huh? What’s that sound? Is that...wings flapping? Where?” Aqua wondered.

“Above us! In the sky... Is that a bird?!” Megumin asked.

“No, it’s a wyvern!” said Darkness. “And there’s someone on its back!”

I looked up and discovered that there was indeed a wyvern parked above us in the air. Riding on it was a guy in clothing worthy of a gentleman.

“*Pant! Pant!* It’s Lia, in the flesh...! Her thighs! How blinding in the light of the sun! I just want to *nuzzle* them!” The guy was leering at Lia, babbling in a state of rapture. Maybe clothes make the man, but they don’t make him any less of a pervert!

“Thighs?! Nuzzle?! What in the world?!” Lia said.

“Ah! Please, pardon me. I simply couldn’t restrain my excitement. But allow me to introduce myself. I am Daniel.”

Daniel, Daniel... Why did that name sound so— Wait! It couldn’t be! Was he the former almost general of the Demon King that Wiz had talked about?!

“Daniel. That makes you the boss of that troll who lost it at our handshake event,” Lia said. “Just what do you want?!” She was pointing bravely up to the sky, but Cielo was hiding behind her, maybe freaked out by the fact that the guy was a total perv.

“That’s quite a way to speak to one of your loyal fans... It does have its charm, though. That’s my *oshi*, Lia!”

The perv! The gentleman! The...pervleman? Anyway, could he really be that powerful?

“Gosh! Lia’s your *oshi*; that Charlie guy was all about Cielo... Why aren’t *I* anyone’s crush?” Erika pouted. I wasn’t sure that was the real problem here.

“I suppose there’s no accounting for *taste*,” said Daniel. “Ahem! I’ve come here today to invite all the Axel Hearts, including my dear *oshi*, to my castle.”

“Invite us?! Well, we’re not going! Especially not after that troll of yours busted up our tour at the capital!” Erika said. And she was darn

right. Nobody would be stupid enough to just toddle off after a freak like that.

"I see. Such a shame. I so hoped I wouldn't have to use force." Daniel jumped off the back of his wyvern and landed on the ground as nimbly as a cat. Then he tossed his hat away and bent backward, howling, "Hrrrr...rraaaghhhh!"

"What a lot of noise," Aqua commented. "What, does he transform, too? Spare me! Another ugly mug..."

I thought she could stand to be just a little more concerned about this. That Cielo-crazed troll had been bad enough, and *this* guy was *that* guy's boss. If it was true that he'd almost become one of the Demon King's generals, then he wasn't going to be any slouch.

Daniel's body kept getting bigger, his clothes tearing at the seams to reveal rippling muscles. He had red eyes and sharp fangs. It was blindingly obvious that he was very bad news!

"Ah... It's been ages since I revealed myself in this form. You shall witness the true power of a troll lord!"

"D-did he say troll lord?!" Megumin said, her eyes wide. Were troll lords really that big a deal?

"And now, my dear Axel Hearts, you're coming with me!"

"E-eeek!" The girls huddled together and cowered. Pretty fair, considering a vicious monster had just threatened to abduct them.

"Stop right there! You're not laying a hand on those ladies!" I bellowed...from safely behind Darkness, who'd jumped out to confront Daniel.

"Kazuma! That...that would sound a lot cooler if you weren't hiding," Darkness said.

"Those girls are my ticket to wealth—I mean, uh, my valued companions! You think I'd hand them over so easily?!"

"Did you just say *ticket to wealth*, Kazuma?" Aqua asked, scowling at me. Curse her and her sharp ears.

"No, I didn't. Now let's go, everyone! We have to protect Lia and the others!"

"Let me handle defense! Just look at that vile, lecherous face! And listen to all those disgusting, perverted things he said! Ah! When I imagine such foul lust being directed at me... It's more than I can stand!"

Nice to see Darkness smiling as she stood in the front row. If it came down to a contest of pervert versus pervert, we couldn't lose.

"Hoh. You're rather easy on the eyes yourself, aren't you?" Daniel said. "But I've got no interest in the likes of you. I want dancers who strike the perfect balance of vitality and beauty. I've no need for people as helplessly sexy as yourself."

"Hngh! I curse my own body for reveling in this abuse...!"

Daniel started expounding on his view of the ideal dancing girl. "Listen up! It takes more than tits and ass to make a good—"

"Hey! I'd say the T & A are pretty important!"

His personal info dump was interrupted by none other than... Dust?! Oh yeah. I guess he'd been in the audience, hadn't he?

"If there's a girl with huge knockers around, don't you find yourself looking?" Dust demanded.

"Well, yes, but I'm more drawn to thighs than breasts," Daniel replied.

"Fair enough! Slim, sculpted legs are great, too. I'll give you that. But boobs bouncing every time a girl takes a step—that inviting tush—just picture it!"

"Hrrrm... I can't say you're mistaken. But still..."

The two of them were having a conversation even as they battled. A conversation some of us didn't necessarily want to hear, sure, but what I needed right now was time, and Dust was buying it for me, so I didn't stop them.

Daniel might not sound like much, but he was obviously not someone to trifle with. If Mitsurugi were around, he probably would have had a fighting shot, but he'd gone home. Never there when we needed him!

I could think of one other way to take down Daniel.

"Megumin, get an explosion ready."

"Can I really?!" she said. We were outside of town, but dropping an explosion right on the arena would still be, you know, less than ideal. Luckily, I had a plan for that.

"Yeah, go right ahead. We'll blame all the destruction on Daniel!"

Darkness was handling the defense, so everyone else was able to focus on attacking, and the damage would be taking its toll on Daniel bit by bit, but it wasn't enough to finish him. He was gradually pushing us off the main stage, although we were holding on for the moment, somehow.

"Grr! Not bad, not bad... But nowhere near enough to defeat me!"

"Kazuma, what do we do? This guy's pretty strong," Aqua whined. If he'd been an undead, Aqua's magic would have been a great choice, but against a troll, it would only help him.

"I guess it shouldn't be surprising—he almost did become a general of the Demon King! Even if he isn't cute at all..." Erika said.

"And he lacks something in awfulness," Darkness added. "If you were really part of the Demon King's army, then shame me by tearing off my armor!"

Nice try, girls—but both of them were sort of missing the point.

"This isn't about my appearance or my awfulness! I'm going to rip your mouths off so you can't mock me anymore!" Daniel shouted.

I almost had him where I wanted him. *Thanks for helping me buy time, everyone!*

“You’re the one who won’t be doing any more mocking!” I said.

“Hrm? What’s this sudden increase in magic?”

“Behold the depth of my Crimsonality, darker than dark and blacker than black! You shall see—”

“Ye gods! Is this—?”

A huge mass of magic began to swell on the end of Megumin’s staff. Daniel watched it, speechless and horrified. Even as the audience evacuated, we had lured Daniel to the edge of town, trying to make it look like we were fighting for our lives all the way. Perfect! Out here we could unleash an explosion without worrying about who might get caught up in it.

“All right, let ’er rip, Megumin!” I shouted.

“So I shall! Go forth! *Exploooooosion!!*”

The magic slammed into Daniel. Direct hit!

“Grrrrraahhh!” he cried, but we could only hear him for a second. The sound was wiped out by the roar of the pillar of flames that engulfed him. There was a rush of burning wind and thick, dark smoke.

“Hah! Fantastic! That was one nice explosion!” Megumin said.

“*Cough, cough!* Yeah, nice work, Megumin. Just lie there for a moment; I’ll come get you. Everybody in one piece?” I said. I wasn’t worried about Aqua and Darkness, who were used to this by now. I was more concerned about the Axel Hearts. This was their first experience of Explosion.

“I’m still here... Somehow...,” Cielo said.

“Ugh, as if one vicious, lust-crazed troll wasn’t enough! It’s a crime to be so adorable, and this is my punishment!” said Erika.

“Thank you, Kazuma. This is all because of your help,” Lia added. The three of them emerged from the cloud of dust, brushing off their clothes but smiling.

“Hey, I had you three to help me beat Daniel,” I said.

“Maybe, but that’s not all,” Lia said. “We passed the prelims, grew as dancers, and deepened our bonds of friendship... A lot has happened since we met you, Kazuma. You have our thanks.”

All right, so my interest in them wasn’t exactly selfless, but still. Even I blushed at such a sincere show of gratitude. “Ah, I’m your producer. You don’t have to thank me. You wanna pay me back? Go out there and win that contest. I’ve got high hopes for you, Axel Hearts!”

““““Yes sir, Mr. Producer!”””” They all gave me their most determined looks.

“Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh! That was some whack you gave me.”

Right as I was hoping I could say that all's well that ends well, the dust cleared to reveal someone I really didn't want to see. Daniel was at the epicenter of the blast, getting to his feet. All the armor he'd been wearing had been blown off, so he was practically naked, and he was looking a lot worse for wear—but he wasn't down for the count.

"He's still alive after that gigantic explosion?!"

"Stand back, everyone!" Darkness said, leaping forward. "Beasts are always most dangerous when they're wounded! But at least I've finally found a suitable opponent!" She stared Daniel down, and he stared right back.

My good mood vanished into thin air. We'd used up our once-a-day Explosion, and he still hadn't gone down! That sucked. That sucked *bad*. We'd used up our trump card, and even though Daniel was hurting, I wasn't confident our attacks could get past his defensive power.

"This is where you exclaim, '*I never expected puny humans to use an attack like that!*' or whatever, and then you launch your most powerful blow! And it smashes through my armor, and I am humiliated in front of the whole world!" Darkness said. It was nice that her spirit wasn't broken, but as taunts went, that was...not a great one.

"Still ready and willing to boast, in these straits? You're worthy of the name of Crusader. But it's obvious that you're just trying to distract me so your friends can recuperate!"

Darkness caught her breath and couldn't meet Daniel's eyes. I was glad he was willing to read so much into it. The rest of us knew it was just a fetish thing. Whatever, though—it kept him focused on Darkness and gave us some distance.

"Again, I admire your resoluteness of spirit. Much as I would like to indulge your interest in my most powerful attacks, however, defeating you and your friends is not my objective here."

He wasn't gonna make it that easy, huh? Daniel ignored Darkness, turning toward Lia and the Axel Hearts.

"N-no! Stay back!" Lia said.

"I'm going to scoop up these adorable dancers, which is what I came here for! And then you can all give a private performance at my castle!" He started toward the Axel Hearts with a series of long strides.

One person stood between him and them, looking supremely confident—Aqua. "Get behind me, everyone," she said. "I'm going to give him a taste of a goddess's rage and grief, her killer move! God Bl—"

"*Bind!!*" Daniel shouted. A rope leaped from his hand and wrapped itself around the Axel Hearts. Dammit! How could a troll use Bind?!

"Wh-what's this? A rope?!" Lia cried.

“Wow. Being tied up like this takes me right back to the first quest we went on together, Lia.”

“This is no time for a trip down memory lane!”

Yep: The rope had caught Aqua, too—but the trade-off was that Cielo and Erika seemed to have escaped it.

“Well, now. I go fishing for dancers and land one very strange stranger as part of the bargain. Well, I got my *oshi*, Lia, so I suppose that’s good enough. Wyvern! It’s time to go!”

“Hey! No! You don’t want anything with me, so let me go!” Aqua said.

“Ahhhhh!” Lia cried. Daniel picked her up in a firefighter’s carry, but really rather gently; Aqua, meanwhile, hung there like hand luggage. They struggled to get free, but not only were they tied up, the guy carrying them was way stronger than they were. There was really nothing they could do as he carted them away.

“No!” Cielo cried as she and Erika watched Daniel go.

“Not Lia!” Erika howled.

“Dammit, Daniel!” I fumed. “Let Lia go!”

“Excuse me! I’m here, too!”

I heard someone else’s voice, but I didn’t have time for that right now.

“I think I’ll settle for Lia today. Cielo and Erika can come another time,” Daniel growled.

“You wait right there! Aqua I can take or leave, but give us back Lia!” I shouted.

“Aqua you can *what*?! I thought I was your friend! Your comrade! Your precious adventuring companion!”

Oops. I guess I’d spoken a little too much from the heart.

“I need Lia to win that contest! I don’t need *you* to do anything!” I said.

“Kazuma! How can you say that?!” Aqua cried.

“Done saying your good-byes? Then if you’ll excuse me, I must be on my way.” The wyvern flapped its wings and hefted itself up into the air, growing smaller and smaller along with Lia and Daniel’s accidental captive, Aqua.



“Cielo! Erikaaaa!”

““Lia!””

The other two ran after her, but they couldn't reach her up there. She only got farther away.

Aqua yelled, “Kaaaadjuumaaaaah!”

Mocking all our fear and anxiety, the wyvern disappeared beyond the clouds, taking Lia and Aqua with it.

Chapter Four

1

It had been three days since Aqua and Lia had been abducted right in the middle of the final stage of the Axel dancing-contest prelims.

“Ahhh... I feel like a whole new man,” I said, looking at the cloudless blue sky from where I soaked in an outdoor bath. It was the perfect remedy for my exhausted body and mind.

“Um, Kazuma, are you sure now is the time to be relaxing in a hot spring?” Megumin asked from across the wall that divided the men’s and women’s baths.

“Well, what else are we supposed to do? I feel bad that they got kidnapped and all, but we don’t even know where Daniel is.”

“At this very moment, those horrible trolls might be pinning Aqua and Lia down, ripping their clothes off... Hngh!”

“I warn you, Darkness, don’t get too excited in the hot spring. You will get light-headed.”

“Tag-teamed by two trolls with their hideous, fleshy bodies! Gods, I’m so jealous—I mean horrified! I wish *I* could be...*blurb, blurb, blurb...*”

“Ahhh! Kazuma! Darkness got light-headed!”

I heard a lot of splashing and shouting from the women’s side of the bath. Too bad it was Lia and not Darkness that Daniel snatched. *All* of us might have been happier that way.

2

“Urgh... I still feel kind of...floaty.”

“I warned you! I warned you that you would get dizzy!”

Megumin was fanning Darkness where she lay stretched out in the hot spring’s relaxation room.

“I’ve gotta say, you guys don’t seem especially worried,” someone said. I spun around to find a pretty young woman with silver hair and a small scar on her cheek—it was Chris.

“Huh! All the people I might have expected, I wasn’t thinking of you, Chris,” I said.

“Gee, that’s...kind of depressing. And here I’ve got some intel for you on your little problem.” She crossed her arms and grinned, obviously feeling pretty sure of herself.

“Intel? You mean, like...”

“Yep. You asked me to help look for Lia and Aqua? Well, I found out where they are.”

“No way! Tell me, tell me!” I’d never dreamed we would learn their location so quickly. I had to hand it to Chris—she was as good at gathering info as she was at thieving.

“I’ll tell you, but first you give me the ‘show of gratitude’ you promised.”

“Thank you so, so much!” I said.

“That’s not what I meant!” Chris made a circle with her fingers and got up in my face. I guess she wanted a more tangible reward. Chris wasn’t greedy by any means, but she *was* a real stickler for keeping promises.

Huh! Just another item on my growing list of debts. Beggars can’t be choosers, though. Like I said, Aqua was one thing, but I had to rescue Lia. I would steal her back and flip that contest on its head! This was definitely the shortest route to paying off my debts... I was pretty sure. Oh yeah!

“Hey, you wanna join me for a little while? It’d be great to have someone as competent as you around, Chris.”

“You can’t swindle me with a little flattery! Payment first, then talk.” She somehow managed to shove her face even closer. I’d thought maybe I could throw her off by changing the subject, but I guess she wouldn’t go down that easy.

But then she said, “Just kidding! It’s cool—I’ll help. Word is there’s a ginormous treasure hidden in that castle. No self-respecting thief would miss out on that. Besides, where they’ve been taken... I’m worried about them. And this troll Daniel—there’s something about him that bugs me.”

“Bugs you how?”

“Trade secret.” Chris held up her pointer finger and winked. I knew that meant I wasn’t going to get anything else out of her, so I decided to drop it.

“Well, what are we waiting for?” I said. “Let’s go!”

I was good and refreshed from my bath and all set to sally forth, when the door of the relaxation area burst open. “Kazuma! Huff... Puff... Thank goodness we made it in time!”

It was Cielo and Erika, gasping for breath.

“What’s the matter, you two? Didn’t I tell you to wait in Axel?” I was pretty sure I’d said that my friends and I would handle the investigation.

“But you’re going to rescue Lia, aren’t you? We can’t just sit by while you do all the work,” said Erika. “Take us with you!”

“I mean, I hear you... But the bad guy’s whole *thing* is to kidnap the three of you, so I feel like bringing you with me would sort of be leading lambs to the slaughter...”

I knew how they felt, but I would be playing right into Daniel’s hands if I let them come along.

“Believe me, we know how dangerous it is,” Erika responded. “But we can’t do nothing! Lia’s a dear friend of ours! Right, Cielo?”

“Y-yeah, I’m tired of just letting everyone else protect me! Anyway, this problem concerns us Axel Hearts together! I’m begging you, let us come along!” She came right up to me and was about to clasp my hand, but I politely dodged her. She was so distraught that she’d even forgotten her fear of men.

“This is no time to be strong-willed,” I said.

“It’s not their wills that are strong—it’s their bonds of friendship. You can see how much Erika and Cielo care for Lia,” Darkness said. It was going to take forever to try to talk them out of going with me. And we definitely didn’t have forever.

“Argh, fine! You can come!”

3

“Aren’t we there yet, Chris?” I asked. We’d been walking through the mountains for what felt like forever, and honestly, I wasn’t sure I could take much more. When I looked around, all I saw were peaks and rocks. The terrain was so difficult that not even a blade of grass grew here, but we were setting a swift pace just the same.

“All my info tells me we must be close. We should be able to see the castle soon.” Chris, going at the front of our group, squinted into the distance.

“What foolishness, to kidnap my companions!” Megumin announced. “Very well! The second we see that castle, I shall finish this with my explosion—”

“No, don’t! You’ll take Aqua and Lia along with it!” I said. How could she still be so pumped up after we’d walked so far?

“We must reach them before those fiends violate the virtue of their captives...!” Darkness said. I was definitely worried for Lia in that sense, but Aqua? No concern there. In fact, I had a feeling that she would stumble her way safely through this somehow.

“If they were going to kidnap anybody, it should have been the cutest member of the group—me! Well, this is the day I’ll make those trolls regret that they didn’t!” said Erika.

“Oh... What if the castle is full of *men*?”

I knew I wasn't one to talk, but the girls really didn't seem to be taking this very seriously. I was starting to wonder if this party was going to be okay.

"Oh! I can see Daniel's castle!" Megumin exclaimed, pointing, her cape billowing. It was a real castle's castle, and it looked totally out of place in this remote corner of the mountains.

"Wow! I didn't realize it would be quite so sumptuous!" Chris exclaimed. It definitely did look like the kind of place where there could be loads of treasure. Still, when I took a look around at the crew I had with me...well, we didn't look like a heroic party assembled to rescue our friend from a most powerful foe. I thought *I* seemed like the only halfway reasonable person here.

"Hrm. I'm not so sure about this, but we've come this far. There's no backing out now. Keep your wits about you, everyone!" I said.

4

"Okay. We're in. That's a good first step. But we don't know where they're keeping the girls in this huge honking castle."

Once we sneaked inside, we discovered that the castle hallways were startlingly wide—and so long that you couldn't see one end from the other. The ceilings were super-high, too, probably to make room for those hulking trolls. Or maybe it was just a rich guy showing off.

"I'm sure they are on the lower levels! You know how it is! There must be a subterranean dungeon with lava flowing everywhere, that sort of thing!" Megumin said.

"Yes, they must have stripped Lia naked and stuck her down there. Any halfway decent near general of the Demon King would know to do at least that much!" Darkness added. Ugh. Even now, that was still all they could talk about!

"I don't want to hear any more terrible speculation out of either of you! I swear I'll send you flying!" Cielo said. She clenched her fists and marched toward them, provoking a swift apology from them both.

"Let's just get Lia out of here as fast as we can! That contest isn't going to wait for us!" Erika said, at which I nodded firmly. If we couldn't help Lia in time for the main event, all of this would have been for nothing.

"Can I take a few minutes at some point?" Chris said. "After we rescue the ladies is fine. I just want to have a look around and see if there's any treasure."

"Yeah, sure," I said. "But getting Lia back is our top priority. I'll need your help on that."

"Don't worry, I know. I want to help her, too."

To be completely honest, I wanted to go treasure hunting, as well

—anything that might give me a little more money to clear my debts.

“All right! We’re all on the same page? Then let’s go get Lia and head home!” I said.

“Er, perhaps you could remember Aqua *occasionally*,” Megumin said.

Silly Megumin. Of course I was remembering Aqua... No, really.

5

“You know,” I said, “I keep meaning to ask: Where are we?” We’d been scouring the castle, but we hadn’t seen anyone. We’d just been wandering around.

At the head of our group, Chris scrunched her face up uncomfortably. “Uh, yeah... I’ve kinda got the same question...”

“Excuse me?”

“Hey, what do you want? I managed to find the castle, but it’s not like I could get a floor plan. Y’know, you won’t learn and grow if you rely on other people to do everything for you!”

How could Chris cop that kind of attitude with me? She was the one who’d gotten us lost!

“Then you should say so! The way you marched around, I was sure you knew where you were going!”

Okay, maybe this wasn’t the time to be assigning blame. Maybe we should think about splitting up to search the castle.

“Oh! Kazuma? Kazuma!”

“Not now, Cielo, I’m thinking.”

“Yes, but um... Look at that!”

She wouldn’t leave me alone, so I stopped thinking and looked up—and saw a massive form sitting right in the middle of the hallway ahead. “Don’t tell me...,” I said. I knew who that was. It was the obnoxious fan/troll who called himself Charlie. He was in human form at the moment, though, so he just looked like a middle-aged guy with a middle-aged potbelly.

I brought out my weapon just in case, but he didn’t move.

“Kazuma... I believe he’s sleeping,” Megumin said.

“No way, Megumin,” I said. “That’s not how it works.” It was such a ridiculous idea that I laughed it off—but just to be on the safe side, I also listened closely, and to my amazement, I could hear him snoring. “He really is sleeping. All right, now’s our chance to take him down!”

“You would attack a sleeping enemy?! That’s low, even for you!”

“Keep your voice down, Darkness. Listen—battle is all about results. Who cares how you get there? Besides, the guy’s a kidnapper! Justice is on our side! And you can do *anything* in the name of justice!”

Darkness was still frowning. I guess I wasn't getting through to her. Hardheaded as ever. The rest of the group was giving me dirty looks, too, but I ignored them and crept toward Charlie from behind. (I admit, I was a little reluctant about that part.)

"Mmm... My sweet Cielo... Hee-hee-hee!"

Disgusting. In just a few more steps, I would be close enough to attack.

"No! He spotted us?!" Megumin said and raised her staff—but Charlie had showed no sign of waking up. I guess he was just talking in his sleep—but when Megumin shouted, he rubbed his eyes.

In that one second, his gaze met that of the person standing closest to him—Cielo.

"..... Is this a dream?" Charlie said. He gave a great shake of his head and blinked, unable to believe what he was seeing. "Huh... I thought so much about my sweet Cielo that she's appeared in front of me. Hey... When did I fall asleep? Ah, who cares? If this is a dream, then I can do anything I want, right? Ooooh, just you wait, Cielo!"

And then he jumped at her.

"Nooooooooooooo!"

"Hngh!"

As he touched her, out came that right straight, catching him clean across the face. It didn't even matter that Charlie was so much bigger than Cielo: He went flying into the wall on the other side of the hallway.

"Oof... That punch was no dream! But what is the real Cielo doing here?!" Now that Cielo's fist had given him a wake-up call, Charlie was looking around, assessing the situation.

"It's great that you got the first shot in, Cielo, but what's the rest of your plan?!" I shouted. So much for finishing this with one blow!

"Huh! It's *you* lot! How did you get here?!" Charlie demanded. It would have been really convenient if Cielo's punch had just taken him down, but I knew perfectly well that that wasn't going to happen.

"Should've figured we weren't going to get Lia and Aqua back without a fight. I'll take the front row!" Darkness said.

"Yes, it was inevitable that we would be discovered... Well, my name is Megumin! Wielder of Explosion—and she who shall reclaim Lia and Aqua!"

Those two were used to these kinds of accidents, and they were quick to get ready for a fight.

"I don't suppose you'd just *tell* us where you keep your hostages and treasure?" Chris ventured.

"Pfah! Think of me what you will, but I serve Lord Daniel as his right hand. I'm not going to *just tell* you anything!" Charlie snorted.

Figures. *Would you happen to know...? Oh yes, of course.* Yeah, not happening.

“Wh-where’s Lia?!” Cielo demanded.

“She’s right inside this room, my sweet Cielo!”

“I guess what he meant was he wasn’t going to just tell us anything,” I said. The guy was a hopeless case.

“Dammit! That was a dirty trick, using Cielo to get me to talk!”

“You think you’re so smart, just because you can speak a little human language. Please. You overgrown pig.” Erika was sounding a little, uh, meaner than usual. Maybe the stress of Lia’s kidnapping was getting to her.

“P-pig?! How rude! I’m no orc; I am a proud troll! But anyway, fine... If I capture Erika and Cielo with the ritual to awaken the ancient weapon nearly upon us, Lord Daniel will be very happy with me!”

Ritual? Awaken an ancient weapon? I definitely did not like the sound of any of that.

I thought I heard Chris say, “Uh-oh... Sounds like my bad feeling might have been on target.” But she was talking sort of to herself, and I couldn’t quite be sure.

“Hey, Charlie, think you could tell us more about—?” I started, but he didn’t seem to hear me. Instead, he struck his most imposing pose and bellowed, “Hr... Hrrr... Hrrraaaaahhhhhh!! Yaarrrrrgghhhh!” He began changing from human to troll form.

“He and his damn transformation!” I shouted.

“Ugh... I know it’s been a while since I saw this, but *ugh!*” Erika said. She backed away, looking truly disgusted.

“H-hey... Why would you say that?” Charlie asked.

“No! Stay away from me! You’re gross, gross, gross! You’re not cute at all!”

“What? I’m...gross?” I guess Charlie was pretty shocked by that, because he slumped to the floor and curled up, hugging his knees.

“E-Erika, I think you hurt his feelings... Maybe you should apologize,” Cielo said.

“Oh yeah? So what, Cielo? You see a transformed monster and you *don’t* think it’s ugly and filthy and hideous?”

Cielo paused and studied Charlie. When he realized she was looking at him, he looked back with hope in his eyes.

“I... I wouldn’t say he’s gross or hideous or any of those things... But I guess he’s not cute.”

“N-not cute... My dear, sweet Cielo thinks I’m not cute... B-b-b-but why?!” To have his very own *oshi* strike a blow like that was more than Charlie could bear. He fell over on his side, tears pouring down his face.

“Look, now he’s crying. I have to admit, I’m starting to feel a little bad for him...”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Megumin. This is our chance, everyone!” I pulled out my sword and held it high in a *follow-me* flourish, but nobody moved. “What? If you’ve got an objection, say something!”

Nobody took me up on that, but none of them looked very enthusiastic.

“Do I have to remind you that he’s one of the bad guys? We have to defeat him and find out where they’re keeping Lia, or we’ll never be able to save her!”

“Y-yeah, I guess so...,” Erika said.

“Yes... It’s for Lia,” Cielo said. The thought of helping their friend seemed to convince them, and they followed me.

“I really wish you would at least mention Aqua, Kazuma...”

“You haven’t *really* forgotten about her, have you?”

Oh! That’s right, Aqua was here, too, wasn’t she? I’d just been so focused on rescuing Lia.

“O-o of course I haven’t forgotten her. All right, everyone, let’s become monsters to save our friends!”

“Waaaaaaaaaahhhh!” Charlie was still weeping with shock as we crept up behind him.

6

After we beat up and hog-tied Charlie, we made him tell us where the girls were being held. Now we found ourselves at the room he’d described.

Megumin stood at the double doors and listened. “This must be the place Charlie was talking about,” she said. “It looks like it’s locked, though...”

“Stand back,” Darkness said, stepping up and taking the handle of the door on the right. “I can deal with a measly lock like this... Hmmp!”

“I’ll help, too,” Cielo said, taking the left handle. They nodded at each other, then pulled in perfect sync. There was a creak, then the lock gave way, and the door came open.

“Thanks, Macho Maidens,” Erika said.

““Don’t call us macho!”” they snapped. All three of them were wasting time, though. I pushed past them and slipped into the room.

“Aqua,” I hissed. “Lia! You okay? Hrk!” I almost choked on the stench. All the furnishings in the room were topsy-turvy, and there was trash everywhere. This was beyond not having anywhere to step—the place was practically buried in garbage.

“Yuck! This is appalling,” Chris said. She had her hand over her

mouth, but I still couldn't miss her scowl. She must have been imagining the worst.

"You don't suppose the two of them were attacked and fought back tooth and nail, do you?!" Darkness said. "Charlie did mention something about a ritual to revitalize an ancient weapon. Maybe they were taken somewhere else..."

"Curse that Daniel!" I said. He was one step ahead of us!

"Hold up, everyone," Erika said. "We think there might be another way of looking at this... Right, Cielo?"

"Y-yes... This actually looks quite familiar," Cielo said. Both of them seemed a bit uncomfortable.

"Hmm... Huh? *Sniff, sniff*... I think I smell fresh air!"

"A-Aqua! You're all right?!" I said as she popped out from under one of the piles of trash.

"Kazuma? Waaaaaah! Kazumaaaaaa! I can't believe it took you so long to rescue me! Oh, it's been *awful*!" She bawled and clung to me.

"Ugh, you stink! You smell like trash! Get away from me! Don't rub your face on my shirt!"

"There, there. It must have been very hard for you, Aqua, but it's all right now. But uh, you have garbage in your hair..." Megumin said.

"Those trolls must have been absolutely brutal to you," Darkness volunteered. "And I would love to hear all the horrible details about everything they did to you!"

Guys... Don't back away when you're pretending to sympathize.

"No, you've got it all wrong! Those trolls didn't touch us—they just like dancers," Aqua said.

"What's been so awful, then?" asked Chris. She was standing at the door, holding her nose, and hadn't even tried to come in the room.

"Uh... Well..."

"Lia! Lia, you're okay!" Erika exclaimed. Lia had surfaced not far from Aqua. She looked completely unfazed. In fact, she looked... sleepy?

"Erika? Cielo? You came to rescue me? Yawwwn..."

"You're sleeping in a mountain of trash like this? I guess that's just like you, Lia," Cielo said fondly. She and Erika were obviously used to this sort of thing; they were talking to Lia as if nothing was wrong.

"You both seem rather sedate for an emotional reunion," Megumin remarked.

"Well, sure," Erika said. "We knew from the minute we came in here that Lia was all right."

"The fact that the room was so dirty proved it!"

Ah! That was why the state of the room had looked so familiar. Still... They knew she was all right because the room was a complete

disaster zone? Could Lia really live with herself like that?

“Now, now, Lia, you can’t do this when you have a roommate. Just think how Aqua must feel with the room so messy,” Cielo said.

“You think it’s that bad? Aqua told me to be careful, too, so I tried to be considerate...”

Wow. This was her *trying*?

“I admit, it definitely looks better than normal,” Erika said. “I haven’t even seen any six-legged bugs yet... Ugh. So not cute.”

“If you’d taken any longer to come get me, I think that rotting, smelly stuff would have started growing mushrooms, and—”

“Stop! That’s enough! I can’t take any more talk about this filth!” Chris shouted, hugging herself and shivering. I guess this wasn’t her favorite topic.

“It was just... It was just so painful, you know? I kept cleaning and cleaning, and the trash just kept spreading...”

When I pictured Aqua living in this dump, even I couldn’t help but sympathize.

“All right, all right! I get it. But you all need to calm down. It won’t take them long to find us if we stick around here,” Lia said.

“We brought your adventuring outfit and weapon, Lia,” Erika said. She was already changing into something Cielo had handed her. Aqua likewise stripped off her filth-covered clothes and traded them for a fresh set Darkness had brought. They made me wait in the hallway—I guess they didn’t want me around when they were changing or something—and a few minutes later, the two of them emerged in their new outfits. Which looked substantially like their usual outfits and...at least didn’t really stink of trash.

“Okay, ready to go!” Lia announced.

“I can’t wait to say good-bye to this disgusting place! I want a bath right now!” Aqua was very eager to get home, hustling everyone else out from the room.

“Okay!” I said. “Let’s blow this joint, and—”

“Wait! You got your friends back. Now you have to help *me* like you promised. We look for treasure, *then* we leave. All right?”

Okay, yes, I had promised Chris that we would go treasure hunting, but to be perfectly honest, I really wanted to go home before the enemy boss found us.

“According to my Sense Treasure skill, it’s...this way! Follow me!” Chris said and went running off before I could say anything.

“Guess she’s not waiting to take no for an answer. All right, one more job before we get out of here!” I said. If it could help me pay off my debts, I figured it wouldn’t hurt to try.

When we got to where Chris’s Sense Treasure skill was pointing

her, we discovered a positively ornate throne room. The throne and everything around it was lousy with gold and silver; when Chris saw it, she suddenly looked very interested in furniture shopping.

"This candlestick is burnished gold. It'd fetch a decent price, but I don't know... This magical item, ooh, adventurers would pay a lot for this! But...I dunno."

"Hey! If you don't want it, give it here! And *this* looks expensive... No! We need to get out of here before we get in real trouble!" I said. I was almost sucked into the treasure hunt with Chris, but if Daniel stumbled on us here, we'd be lucky to escape with our lives.

"Yeah, yeah... I didn't find what I was looking for, but this should do." Chris didn't look very happy, despite being surrounded by loot. Well, whatever. I'd already stuffed a few eye-catching gold items into a bag. That would take a nice chunk out of my debt.

"Not to be pushy, but let's get out of here! I haven't had a bath since they brought us here," said Aqua.

"W-well! Maybe we should stop by Arcanletia on the way home and hit the hot springs," Darkness suggested. "Ah... What a great city..."

"You're the only Eris follower who would willingly go to that place! I'll be just as happy if I never find myself there again!" Megumin said. Personally, I agreed with her. I was just nodding vigorously when the speakers situated around the castle crackled to life.

"Lia? Lia? My lovely goddess, Lia! Can you hear me?"

"That voice! It's Daniel!" Cielo said.

"I have your precious stuffed animal. If you want it back, come to the altar that's through the hidden doorway at the back of the throne room."

"Stuffed animal? Does he mean that fox you always cuddle with when you're going to sleep?" Erika asked. She lived with Lia; she would have a guess what Daniel was talking about.

So there was a stuffed animal involved here? I did remember seeing a bunch of them in Lia's room.

"Wait, I remember! Is he talking about that thing I found when we were cleaning your room in Axel, Lia?" I said.

"He's not a *thing*! His name is Konjiro, and he's perfectly gallant!" She must have really liked that toy, because she sounded genuinely angry.

"There's no way we're going in there to rescue a stuffed toy," Darkness said.

"Of course we are!" Lia shot back. "Konjiro was my very first friend! He comforted me when I was all alone! Do you really think Daniel has him?"

She couldn't be serious. Hell, she could hardly be *sane*.

“Lia! It’s me, Konjiro! Please, Lia! Save me!”

Ugh, was Daniel making that creepy pretend voice?

“That’s him! That’s Konjiro! Taking sweet, compassionate Konjiro hostage! Of all the dirty tricks! I’ll make him pay for that! Stay strong, Konjiro! I’m coming!” Lia said. My head hurt just listening to this conversation. I knew there were people who treated their stuffed toys like part of their family, but this was going too far.

Convinced that the enemy had her precious plushie, Lia started searching the back wall of the throne room. It didn’t take her long to find the so-called hidden door, and before I could stop her, she flung it open and disappeared through to the other side.

“Oh! Lia, wait!” Erika cried.

“It’s dangerous to go alone!” said Cielo—and then they rushed after her. Dammit. Why wouldn’t anyone *listen* to me?!

“What shall we do? I assume you intend to go straight to Daniel?” Megumin said.

“Well, we can’t leave them to do it themselves. Let’s get going, quick!” Darkness replied.

As for me, I sighed. “For once, I thought we were going to get out of this without having to fight the big boss. Shows what I know!”

7

We could hear Lia’s agonized shouting from down the hall: “Konjiroooo! If you’re there, answer me!”

“Welcome, Lia. How kind of you to come of your own accord.”

“Daniel! You’ve got some nerve, blackmailing me into this! Give me back Konjiro!”

“Konjiro? Ah, you’re talking about that stuffed toy. I’m afraid you won’t find him here.”

“What?! But I know that was Konjiro’s voice I heard a minute ago...”

“No, that was me. I must apologize for deceiving you.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. How could they just be having this conversation? Why was no one interrupting them with a withering quip?!

“You knew about Konjiro because you’re such a big fan of Lia’s, and you used that information to mislead her,” Erika said.

“Th-that’s terrible!” Cielo added. Those weren’t the kinds of quips I was thinking of! It was great that they’d found her and all, but I was mostly annoyed that they didn’t have anything more pointed to say.

“Hoh! Cielo and Erika, too! It turns out a fox in the hand is worth *two* dancing girls!”

I was *not* giving him any credit for that analogy!

“Why do you look so upset, Kazuma?” Aqua asked, jogging up beside me. “Does your tummy hurt?” Nice of her to worry, but yeah, no.

“I’d resigned myself to conducting the ritual with Lia alone, but it seems all three Axel Hearts have come to me! *Who like a goddess dances, let her don raiment of blue and stand upon the sealed earth!* The prophecy is about to be fulfilled!”

“Prophecy? Fulfilled? Sounds very cool!” Megumin said, thrilled by our enemy’s dubious pronouncement.

Chris, meanwhile, looked a lot less happy. “This ‘prophecy’... Don’t tell me...”

I was curious about what had her so bothered, but there was no time to ask as we raced down the hallway and burst into the altar room. “Lia! Cielo! Erika! Are you okay?!” I asked, shouting as loudly as I could to make sure I interrupted their ridiculous conversation.

“So you’ve come to help your little friends. But you’re too late!” Daniel said. “In order to awaken the ancient weapon, I *will* make them dance for me, by force if I must!”

It all sounded very important the way he said it, but I didn’t know what any of it meant. I needed more exposition here. I got one thing, though: He wanted Lia and her friends to dance.

Daniel began to roar. “Ahhh... Ahhhhh!”

“He’s going for his troll lord form! Everyone watch out!” I said.

“This stinks! He’s going to turn into a big, nasty, uncute monster, just like Charlie!” Erika said, remembering the other troll’s hideous transformation. She looked at Daniel with utter contempt.

“Hold on there,” he said. “Uncute? No, no, I’m afraid that won’t do. Trolls are much cuter than you might think!”

“Not even! They’re ugly, hideous, and atrocious! The opposite of adorable! I’m the poster girl for cuteness, so I should know!”

“Hrn! Grrr...”

Was it just me, or did Daniel seem surprisingly taken aback by that? Maybe he was one of those guys who wanted to be told he was cute... Wait, that was it!

“If you transform into your ugly troll self, none of the girls will like you,” I said. “Not just Erika. You won’t like him, either, will you, Lia? Cielo?”

“Oh! Well, uh...,” Cielo said, not sure how to answer that. I gave her a look.

“His human form is pretty cool, right? You like his human form better, don’t you?”

“W-well... Yeah, better than his troll form,” Lia said. Cielo might not be quite getting it, but Lia caught on.

“You too, Lia?! Ahem! Well, very well, I suppose. For today, I

shall battle you in my human form!"

He fell for it! As long as he didn't turn into his troll self, we had a chance to win this!

"And now, my dear Axel Hearts, you will dance for me—and for the activation of this ancient weapon."

"The hell they will!" I shouted. "Let's go!"

8

I'd assumed that keeping Daniel in his human form would give us a fighting chance, but once the battle was actually on, I discovered we couldn't strike a decisive blow. Darkness was absorbing Daniel's attacks, while the Axel Hearts, boosted by Aqua's buffs, handled our offense—but we couldn't seem to make that last push. Unfortunately, Chris and I didn't have a lot to contribute to a pitched battle like this.

"Huff... Puff... You've got a lot of oomph for someone who hasn't transformed. No wonder you almost became one of the Demon King's generals," Lia said.

"That's very kind of you to say. And I must tell you, I've underestimated you as well. I never expected you to press me so hard. Cute or not, I believe I may have to transform after all..."

Crap! We had to finish this before he did that! Maybe it was time for an all-or-nothing gamble!

"This castle looks pretty sturdy. I'll bet it can survive one good hit! Light him up, Megumin!"

"It is my pleasure, Kazuma! *Explosion!!*"

The blast wind slammed into us, while in the middle of it all Megumin lay sedately, out of magic.

The dust started to clear, and I could almost see...

"Where is he? Did we do it?!" Darkness asked.

"Dammit, don't say that!" I snapped. She had to throw a flag first thing!

"Oof! Huff... Huff..." In the middle of the crater was Daniel, pretty scorched but somehow still alive. I'd hoped that being in his human form would let us pull this off somehow, but we still didn't have that last little bit we needed. Ugh! Why couldn't I catch a break? I was running out of ideas.

"You're still moving? You just don't give up, do you?!" Erika said.

"No... No. I've reached my limit... I don't even have the strength left to transform. L-Lia... I have just one last request... As your biggest fan... Before I go, would you let me see your glorious dancing one more time?"

"No," Lia said flatly.

"Wh-what?! Why not? Surely you can't refuse a fan's last request!"

“Do you understand what you did?” Erika asked him.

“I’m a dancer, so of course my fans are more important to me than anything. But *you*—you used Konjiro to trick me so you could get what you wanted! That was an awful thing to do!” said Lia.

“A-and you dare call yourself a fan? You’re just a pervert!” Cielo added.

That all seemed pretty fair. Who would ever indulge such an obnoxious fan?

Daniel, though, pounded the floor and wailed, “Ah! Ahhh! Ahhhhhh! I-i-it’s the end of the wooooooooorrrllldddd!” It was a heck of a thing, seeing a grown man...er, troll...cry. And all this when *he* was the one who’d kidnapped the girls!

“Pfft, hee-hee-hee! What a loser! You got this whole room ready! Just for them! And then... They shot you down! L-O-S-E-R!” Aqua danced around Daniel, showering him with abuse. She sure was brave in the face of a guy who was already down. “Well, I guess that wraps everything up in a neat little package! Wow, I’m bushed. When we get home, let’s have some nice bubbly! And now for a special victory presentation of the Wonders of Nature!”

She was always happy when she got a chance to perform her favorite party trick.

“W-wait! We have to stop my senior—I mean, we have to stop Aqua from dancing!” exclaimed Chris, who seemed very nervous about the Wonders of Nature for some reason. Maybe she just didn’t think this was the time to be, you know, dancing around and stuff. She could be awfully uptight for a thief. Still, I had to agree that we had other things to do.

“All right, come on,” I said. “Quit playing around, and let’s finish... Hmm?”

It had suddenly gotten very dark. I looked out the windows to discover black clouds roiling above the castle. A damp, warm breeze blew through the windows of the altar room.

“Wha—? The weather suddenly—yipes! Did you hear that thunder? What in the world is going on?” Megumin, startled by the lightning and thunder, seemed out of sorts.

“We’re too late!” said Chris, biting her lip and looking at the clouds with agitation.

“I’m sure this is your fault, Aqua!” I snapped. “The heavens are angry because you kicked that guy while he was down!”

“Don’t tell me about the heavens! I’m a goddess!”

“A goddess? Wait... Wait just a second,” I said. Something about what she’d said rang a bell...

“What is it, Kazuma? You suddenly look so serious,” Darkness said, but I barely heard her. I was too busy trying to remember. Before

the battle had started, I'd heard something that sounded really important... What was it?

"Guys... Didn't Daniel say something about awakening an ancient weapon? You know, some kind of prophecy or something?"

"Ah yes! *Who like a goddess dances, let her don raiment of blue and stand upon the sealed earth!* I remember because it sounded so cool," Megumin said. Well, the Crimson Magic Clan certainly knew cool when they— No!

"You've gotta be kidding me," I groaned. "It couldn't mean—"

"What are you getting all bent out of shape about, Kazuma? Do you need to go to the toilet?" Aqua asked, looking blissfully, infuriatingly oblivious.

"No!" I said. "Aqua... I want to make absolutely certain about this. You *are* a goddess, right? Like, as far as it goes?"

"What do you mean, as far as it goes?! I'm a goddess right down to my bones!"

"And that outfit you're always wearing, what color is it?"

"You're only just now noticing the wonderfulness of my clothes? It's my trademark—a beautiful *blue* outfit, as befits the goddess who controls water!" She spun around in place to show off her costume. But I already knew what it looked like—it was the same outfit she always wore.

"Last question. What did you do just now?"

"My greatest, supreme party trick! Beloved by all and sundry for its beauty, that was the *dance* called the Wonders of Nature!"

"You! Useless! Goddess! You couldn't have fulfilled that prophecy better if you'd tried!" I shouted.

Who like a goddess dances, let her don raiment of blue and stand upon the sealed earth! Could it really have been talking about Aqua? Who came up with these dumbass activation conditions anyway?! For that matter, how stinking contrived was it that the weapon would just happen to activate when Aqua danced?

"Eek!" A flash of light filled my vision, and I heard Lia cry out. There was a huge crash, and part of the castle's roof was blown away, leaving a massive hole. There was another flash, and lightning struck the altar. Something emerged from the blinding bolt...

"Wait! The lightning is collecting and...crystallizing?!" I said.

"Ah! The weapon I've dreamed of so long is finally mine! Mwah-ha-ha! Mwah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!" Daniel cried, clambering to his feet and going toward the altar. He grabbed the object that the lightning had been feeding: a massive hammer. "At last, it's mine! This golden instrument, most potent of ancient weapons! Its name...Thor's Hammer!"

"How did he get the weapon? Lia didn't even perform the ritual!"

Cielo said. I couldn't blame her for wondering. Probably only one other person here besides me understood what had happened. This was no time to be complaining that the activation conditions were absurd. The point was, Thor's Hammer was here, and we had to deal with it.

"Uh! Um! K-Kazuma, this...isn't my fault, is it...?" Aqua squeaked.

"Of course it's your fault! Your stupid bumbling just happened to align perfectly with the requirements of the ritual!"

"Waaaaaaaaaah!" she wept. *I was the one who wanted to cry!*

"I can feel the power just holding it! With this, the world itself is within my grasp! Ahhh, ha-ha-ha-ha!" Daniel said. Stupid Aqua, awakening an ancient weapon. Dammit, this was really getting out of hand! What the hell was I supposed to do now?!

"What are *you* going to do about this?!" I demanded.

"Don't get mad at me! I didn't mean to do anything wrong!" Aqua said.

"I don't quite get what's going on, but please don't be too hard on Aqua," Lia said. "This all started because I went and got myself kidnapped!" She was trying to take some of the heat off Aqua, but she didn't understand why I was so upset. With the prophecy worded the way it was—*Who like a goddess dances, let her don raiment of blue and stand upon the sealed earth!*—no one who didn't know Aqua was a goddess would be able to make sense of it.

It was all a moot point, though—whether she'd understood what she was doing or not, Aqua had fulfilled the conditions and reactivated the ancient weapon.

"Mwah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Mine at last! That most powerful ancient instrument, Thor's Hammer!"

I knew that name from video games and movies and stuff. I was pretty sure it belonged to the god of thunder or something.

"I—I feel a tremendous magical power!" Cielo said, shaken.

"What do we do? What do we do?! Ooh, we're in so much trouble!" Erika jabbered. Unfortunately, I didn't have the time to try to talk them down. In fact, I had the same question as Erika: What were we going to do? How could we pull off a win at a moment like this?

"Get behind me, everyone! I'll take the brunt of his attack!" Darkness said, stepping forward to shield us.

Chris, though, exclaimed, "No, don't! Even you won't be able to withstand a blow from that thing!" I was with her on this one—Darkness's durability might be her only redeeming quality, but it looked to me like a shot from that hammer would leave even her in tatters. Meanwhile, Megumin, our biggest source of firepower, had been limp on the ground since letting off her explosion.

“This is no time to be lying around, Megumin. We have to get out of here, posthaste!”

“No, wait. Look at that—look at the golden glow that hammer emits! Ah... It’s enough to tug at the heartstrings of a Crimson Magicker! Take me to this Thor’s Hammer! I wish to see it from right up close!”

“And *I* want to be *hit* by it from right up close!”

Even in this situation, these people refused to break character!

“Er... Perhaps it’s strange for me to say this, but this weapon is quite dangerous. You could stand to show a *little* more fear and caution.” Even Daniel wasn’t sure what to make of their reactions.

“I just want to get a better look at it! Take me to the hammer, Kazuma!”

“Like hell! We’re plenty close to see how dangerous it is—we need to get out of here!”

“Ugh. I’m trying to work with you here, but even I’m not sure what I’m doing anymore.” Daniel huffed. He acted like he had all the time in the world, which, as the guy holding the biggest weapon, he kind of did.

“Lord Daniel! Finally... You finally have it!”

“I do. Now all that remains is to finish off these pesky adventurers... Don’t worry, my little dancers, *you* shall enjoy all my hospitality!”

Dammit, now even Charlie was here. I had to hand it to trolls, though—they knew how to heal themselves. We’d really beaten the shit out of him, but here he was.

“Grr! For a second, I thought we had you cornered!” I said.

“I’m sorry to tell you, for your sake, but every hope of victory for you is gone!” Daniel said. “As I shall now demonstrate.” He lifted Thor’s Hammer over his head, grinning. “Howl, O thunder!”

““““Eeeeeeeek!””””

Daniel slammed the hammer into the floor, and it spewed lightning bolts that sent shock waves through the castle, shaking us where we stood.

“Geez! Did you feel that? This castle didn’t flinch at Megumin’s explosion, but it just rocked like a cradle!” I said.

“I think this is really bad news, Kazuma! Those lightning bolts would probably fry us to a crisp if they so much as grazed us,” said Aqua. Well, yeah. Thanks, Captain Obvious.

Personally, I was having a brainstorm: If I flung myself on the ground and begged for mercy, any chance he would at least spare me? Or maybe I could have his favorite, Lia, try to work her charms on him. We might get out of this with our lives.

“Kazuma? Is it just me, or are you plotting something totally

terrible?” Aqua said. Real nice! Most days she couldn’t figure out what people were thinking to save her life. Why was it always times like this when she suddenly got sharp?

“I don’t think even a magical barrier could stand up to that,” Cielo said.

“If he goes out armed like that, the world itself will be in danger,” Lia added, both of them looking very serious. Completely unlike *my* party members.

“Heh! Heh! Heh! *Now* you’re all scared? A little late! Let’s give them another look, Lord Daniel!” Charlie sounded positively gleeful. I squeezed my eyes shut and braced myself...but the attack never came.

I slowly opened my eyes...

“Hrrfh!”

I discovered why Daniel wasn’t attacking—he was on his knees, vomiting blood.

“Whaaaaat?! How did you end up getting electrocuted, Lord Daniel?!”

“I... I don’t know... But clearly, I’ve gravely miscalculated. I have no idea how this happened...”

Daniel had taken the unbelievably powerful attack from closer than any of us—wait, did the weapon blow up on him?! Were we sure it wasn’t some kind of reject?!

“Oh, look, Lord Daniel! The user’s manual awakened along with the weapon!” Charlie said.

User’s manual? What was an ancient weapon doing with one of those?

“Let’s see here... *Thank you for using Thor’s Hammer. In the ancient tongue, the hammer’s name means ‘Destroyer.’ The hammer is an agglomeration of a tremendous amount of energy and is therefore extremely dangerous to handle without proper protection.* Huh! Who knew?”

“It might have been nice to know that sooner. Well, my fault for not reading the manual,” Daniel said.

I don’t know. I wasn’t so sure Daniel was at fault here.

“What else have we got? Uh... *To ensure safe operation, please use the hammer in conjunction with the magical gloves, Járngreipr.* The more you know!”

“Ah, that makes sense,” I heard Chris mumble to herself. “The hammer was supposed to be part of a set... That means there’s still time!” She went from despair to hope to whatever else so quickly. She really kept busy.

“It also says that Járngreipr can be found on Worm Mountain.”

“Ch-Charlie! Don’t say that out loud!”

“Oops!” Charlie slapped his hands over his mouth, but it was too

late.

“You all hear that?” I said.

“Yeah! My ears are way too cute to miss it!” said Erika.

“Having an item like that around means people all over are in danger. We have to find it first and render Thor’s Hammer powerless! Even if I would have liked to experience being hit by a living lightning bolt!” Darkness added.

It was great to have a plan—but I still didn’t know how we were going to get out of here.

“Huh! Think you’re going to escape, do you? In your exhausted state, even Charlie can take you down!”

Bah! So he wasn’t just gonna let us walk out of there. Daniel was badly wounded by the self-destructing weapon. We weren’t exactly in much better shape, but we might have been able to take him alone. With Charlie there, though?

“Just let me handle it, sir! It’ll be my way of making up for that little slip of the tongue... Rrraaahhhh!” Charlie howled at the sky and transformed into his massive body.

“Crap, and Megumin is out of explosions. All right, then... Aqua, you’re up! Do that thing you did to Beldia!”

“I don’t quite follow your thinking, but you’re sure about this, right? Once this spell starts, it won’t stop. *Sacred Create Water!*”

An absolute deluge came from the sky. We humans were light enough to float, and the flood washed us out of the castle, but the trolls’ weight kept them from being carried along.

From behind us I heard, “Curse youuu aaaalllllll!”

9

Once we surfed safely to the castle gate, we scrambled to our feet.

“Phew! I guess we got out of there... Somehow,” I said. Okay, so I’d nearly drowned doing it, but any escape you could walk away from, right? “If Daniel ever figures out how to make that hammer do what he wants, we’re all in a lot of trouble. Heck, I think the entire world might be in danger then.” The weapon might leave something to be desired at the moment, but there was no denying its sheer power.

“The entire world in danger? And I wonder whose fault that might be,” Megumin said.

I flinched. “W-we just happened to be around at the time! We had nothing to do with it!”

“That’s right! I’m the victim here!” Aqua added. No one else seemed very convinced by our protestations of innocence.

“We can worry about excuses later. We need to alert the guild that

that weapon has been unearthed,” Darkness said. Well, none of us could argue with that.

With Megumin on my back and a very grim-looking party behind me, I started toward Axel to warn everyone about the danger they were in.

Chapter Five

1

Back in Axel, we went to the Adventurers Guild and told them about Daniel and Thor's Hammer—and just how dangerous they might be together.

“An ancient weapon that summons lightning with every stroke?” Luna, the guild receptionist, looked like she didn't quite believe what she was hearing.

“That's right! And if Daniel ever gains full control over that power, I'm not sure there's *anyone* who'll be able to stop him,” I said. Somehow nobody seemed terribly interested, in spite of the urgency of my message.

“I saw this thing up close, and I think it may even be more powerful than explosion magic!” Chris said.

“More powerful than Explosion?!” Rin yelped, jumping out of her chair.

“That does sound like bad news,” Dust said, following her. “If he just kept swinging, he'd be pretty much invincible!”

What, they hardly listened when I told them, but then Chris says the same thing and suddenly they're convinced?

“But how did such an ancient and terrible weapon end up in the hands of someone like him?” Rin asked.

It was an innocent question, but it definitely made me choke a little. “Well, uh...” I didn't want to think about what would happen if I admitted the real reason Daniel was able to obtain the hammer.

“In a word, a goddess more beautiful than any other manifested herself from the heavens—”

“Ahhhhh, don't listen to her! Let's just say there was a ritual involved, and Daniel finally completed it!” I exclaimed, grabbing Aqua's head and slapping my hands over her mouth. I desperately wanted to avoid anyone finding out that we'd been directly involved in the weapon's reclamation.

“Thank you for reporting this, Kazuma,” Luna said. “It does sound serious... In fact, it sounds too big for Axel to handle alone. I'll get in touch with the capital right away and begin planning what we'll do.” She started gathering up paperwork and giving instructions to the

other guild personnel.

“Thanks! Boy, it’ll sure be great to have the royal army on our side!” I said.

“I wouldn’t be too optimistic,” Darkness said. “Even if they do send reinforcements, it won’t be for a while. If push comes to shove, I can take all of Daniel’s attacks!”

I wasn’t so sure. Even Darkness probably couldn’t take too many lightning blasts from that hammer and get away with it.

“Daniel always did have astonishing offensive power, ever since he was with the Demon King’s army,” Wiz said. “It’s even possible he’ll come after us right away.”

“The Demon King’s army? How would you know anything about that?” Rin said, startled.

“Uh, Wiz! It was *Daniel* who told us about his time with the Demon King! Right?” I offered.

“Wha—? Oh! Yes! Yes, that’s where we heard that!” she said. I’d brought Wiz along exactly because she knew so much about the Demon King and his forces, but we had to be careful that nothing incriminating slipped out.

“You needn’t worry. If we find ourselves in truly dire straits, my enchanted sword, Gram, and I shall get us all out of danger somehow. For it is my duty to protect the people from danger!”

“W-wow! You’re so cool! Please, rescue me! And then take care of me forever!”

“Er, ah, I’m afraid...”

Mitsurugi found himself cornered by a priest in a blue habit: Cecily. The color of her outfit gave away that she was a passionate Axis disciple. She definitely wasn’t an adventurer—so I assumed she’d ended up here by just following Aqua around like she so often did. The two of them were known to harass Eris priests, who treated them as clear and present dangers.

Anyway, usually I envied the way Mitsurugi was always surrounded by women, but if that woman was Cecily, then he could have her. He wouldn’t get any jealousy from me. But he was here, and that was perfect.

“It’s exactly as the great hero says!” I shouted. “It’s an adventurer’s duty to protect the people! And a threat to the entire world must be met by adventurers everywhere!”

“Wait—great hero? Did you call me a great hero?” Mitsurugi asked, more affected by the title I’d given him than by what I was actually saying.

“Kazuma’s right, this concerns all of us adventurers,” Rin said.

“If we save the world, I bet we’ll get all the money and women we could want... As an adventurer, I feel I must help you!” Dust said.

Nice to have them on board.

“That’s right—let’s do this! For the sake of the world!” I said.

“That’s some nice work, Kazuma,” said Chris. “Artfully obscuring your own involvement and going all *Let’s-do-this?*”

“Hrk! Maybe outsiders would be so kind as to stay out!” I said.

“If you say so. Even though I’m not an outsider. I think I’m gonna go cash out the loot we got from the castle. Once again, my senior has... *Sigh...*” She turned away from me, waving over her shoulder. She was still muttering to herself as she left the guild.

“Even in the middle of a flood, she didn’t forget to grab some treasure for the road. She’s a thief’s thief,” I said. I’d grabbed a few choice pieces for myself and hid them in my bag, but they’d all been washed away in the deluge.

“Uh... Um...”

“I must say, you were awfully cool there, Kazuma,” said Megumin.

“A threat to the world must be met by adventurers everywhere, huh? Not the kind of thing I’m used to hearing from you. Why the change of heart?” asked Darkness.

“Knowing Kazuma, it’s because he’s got some vile scheme in mind,” said Aqua.

“Whose fault do you think all of this is, you useless goddess?” I grumbled. I’d pulled the wool over everyone else’s eyes—er, I mean, gotten them to understand the gravity of the situation—so why did my own party members have to start poking holes in my story?

“Uh! Um!”

“Hmm? What’s up, Lia?” I said.

“Is it really *everyone’s* problem? I mean, if I hadn’t let myself get captured, this would never have happened...” She’d looked despondent ever since we’d gotten out of the castle. I guess she blamed herself for everything.

“You don’t have to feel bad, Lia,” Aqua said. “It’s Daniel’s fault for throwing a stupid tantrum. *No one else* did anything wrong.”

I agreed that Lia wasn’t to blame...but I thought Aqua could stand to feel a *little* guilty.

“B-but what if they cancel the contest because of this? What if Cielo’s and Erika’s dreams never come true, and it’s all my fault?”

“Don’t worry so much, Lia. Even if they do cancel the contest, we’ll have another chance,” Cielo said.

“Yeah, she’s right,” said Erika. “And even if this was somehow your fault, we’re the Axel Hearts, and we share everything. It would be on all three of us. You don’t have to bear that burden alone. So chin up, okay?”

“Yeah... Thanks.”

What beautiful friendship. The way those three supported one

another... It was like the exact opposite of *my* party. I really envied them, to be blessed with such fine comra— Wait. Did she just say what I thought she said?

“Hold on... Cancel the contest?”

“Y-yeah. It seems like they’d have to, for an emergency like this,” Lia said.

Crap! I mean... *Crap!* I needed Lia and her friends to win that contest so I could pay off my debts! Why did they think I’d gone to all that trouble to rescue them?!

“We’ll take care of Daniel—we don’t have a moment to lose! Far be it for me to let anyone rob these young dancers of their dreams!” I said. I’d had every intention of sitting back and letting Mitsurugi and the guild handle things, but it turned out I didn’t have that kind of time.

“Kazuma... You’d do that for us?” Cielo asked.

“I can’t let you do it all alone. I’m going to help you!” said Lia.

“No, you have to stay focused. If you want what’s best for me, then go win that contest!” *And pay off my debts!*

“Hee-hee! You can count on us!” Erika giggled.

“I know I can, Axel Hearts! You let us worry about Daniel—you just get ready for the show!”

2

Once I’d seen the Axel Hearts safely back to their practice, where they were preparing for the big show, I sank into my chair.

“So now we’re committed. Do you have a plan?” Darkness asked.

“Kind of. I figure we just get those Járngreipr gloves or whatever before Daniel does. Then we should be able to deal with the hammer somehow. I’ll be wanting your help, of course.” Given that everyone in my party was responsible for the debts I was so desperately trying to pay off.

“Count me in,” Aqua said. “I’d feel terrible for Lia and the girls if the contest was canceled.”

“That’s all well and good, but we don’t even know where these gloves are. I know Charlie mentioned Worm Mountain, but I’ve never heard of—”

“Hey, d’you mean, like, *Worm Mountain* Worm Mountain?” Dust interrupted.

“You know it?!” I said.

“It’s that volcano on the northern continent, ain’t it? I went there on an expedition once, a long time ago.”

Help came from the strangest places sometimes. Who knew even Dust could be useful every once in a while?

“You know, he did say something about it being way off to the north,” said Aqua. “I didn’t realize you’d been so far away... Say, uh, who are you again?”

“I’m Dust! I went adventuring with you, remember?! Kazuma, if you’re keen to go to Worm Mountain, I can take you there. It’s gonna cost you, though.”

“You’ll show us the way? That would be awesome! I can pay you later!” When this was all over, I expected to have cash to spare. And even if things fell through, and I ended up with nothing, I’d comped Dust’s drinks often enough. I wouldn’t feel bad ducking out on this particular bill.

“Sounds great! I wouldn’t mind being out of Axis country until the heat dies down a bit anyway.”

“He’s racked up more gambling debts, and now he’s trying to get away from them.”

“Keep it to yourself, Rin!” Dust snapped.

Ah. I wondered why he was so eager to help us. Now it all made sense.

3

“Ohhhh *man*, is it cold! If I’d known it would be this bad, I’d never have come!” Dust said as we worked our way one grueling step at a time up a snow-covered mountain. He was at the head of our group, but he wouldn’t stop complaining.

“I thought you said you’d been here. Why are you acting like you didn’t know how cold it was gonna be?” I said.

“We weren’t climbing straight up the mountain back then... Besides, it’s so far back in the mists of time that I forgot about it!” he said. Poor Dust. He drank so much that it probably left his memories hazy.

“Kazuma, please use Kindle! Anything to get a little warmer!”

“No way. I don’t want to waste the energy.”

“What’s wrong with you, Kazuma Sato? A goddess has made you a personal request. Don’t quibble; just grant it!”

“Yeah, no. Hey, what’s Kazamatsuri doing here anyway?” We hadn’t asked him to come along, and now he was giving me orders?

“It’s Mitsurugi! How many times must we have this conversation?! Ahem... Anyway, you said it yourself. A threat to the world is a problem all adventurers must help to solve, is it not? Then surely the great hero with his enchanted sword must lend his aid!”

“Oh yeah! That’s right!” I said. “I guess the more magic, the better. Worm Mountain is supposed to be full of dangerous monsters.” I didn’t like Mitsurugi’s face, or his attitude, but there was no denying

he knew how to handle himself. If things got too ugly, I could just let him deal with everything.

“Look! I can see the shape of a huge mountain! Is that Worm Mountain?” Megumin asked, gesturing with her staff. There was, indeed, a very large mountain ahead of us. We’d hiked all this way, and we still had *that* to climb?

“So the Járngreipr gloves are somewhere on that mountain? That looks like backbreaking labor, trying to search that whole thing,” Darkness said.

“Let’s work our way to the summit!” Aqua replied. “The best treasure is always right at the top!” I knew Darkness was tough stuff, but I was surprised to hear Aqua so enthusiastic. Maybe it was the same way she got all hyped up whenever she saw children or puppies.

“So exactly what kind of dangerous monsters are supposed to be on this mountain?” I asked.

“Oh, I hear the vegetables are especially vicious,” Darkness said. “Anything that can grow somewhere this cold, you know it must be formidable. But they’re supposed to be as delicious as they are deadly!”

Yeah, vegetables attack people in this world. Hell, I’d been roughed up by the garden Aqua and Megumin kept in our front yard.

“I’d rather not be killed by produce,” I grumbled. “Everyone, keep your eyes up!”

“Huff... Puff... This mountain is even bigger than I thought. How about we catch a break here?”

“I’m with Kazuma! I say we warm up with some stiff drinks and a nice cuddle!” said Dust.

“We’ve only been climbing for an hour,” replied Darkness. “How many rests do you need? We’ll never get anywhere at this rate...”

Well, she was a beast when it came to physical endurance. Maybe she would be kind enough not to assume the rest of us mere mortals could match her.

“Hmm? What’s that in the sky up there?” Megumin asked. I looked up and saw a wyvern flying overhead.

“Hey! Do you see who’s on its back? That’s the same wyvern who kidnapped Lia and me!” Aqua said.

“Grr! Using a minor dragon as a shortcut—what a dirty trick! We can’t sit here catching our breath, we have to move!” Mitsurugi said. He started charging through the snow, but I didn’t move a muscle.

“Sounds like a pain. Let’s not and say we did,” I suggested.

“H-how can you spare any effort at a moment like this?! The fate of the world hangs in the balance!”

“Hey, Megumin. See if you can land an explosion on that wyvern.

We're right in its blind spot; I don't think you should have any trouble." Sure, it was a moving target, but it was just flying in a straight line. No problem, right?

Dust looked up. "When you're in the sky, you're vulnerable to ambush from the ground—or so I hear. This might actually work." Uh-huh. And where exactly had he "heard" that?

"That's an even dirtier trick," Mitsurugi muttered, but I pretended not to hear him.

"All right, here I go... *Exploosion!*"

A beam of light arced up toward the wyvern, the Explosion spell landing a spectacular direct hit.

"Wouldja look at that! You got him!" I said.

"Not bad, Explosion Girl!"

Daniel, Charlie, and their mount plummeted down somewhere in the distance.

"Damn fine work, Megumin," I said.

"You didn't even hesitate for a second to ambush him...", said Mitsurugi.

"Kazuma doesn't hesitate in moments like this—it's one of his more incredible qualities."

Yeah, thanks, Darkness. Maybe lay off the "compliments" a bit.

"In-incredible? You don't find it horrendous?"

"Kazuma! Kazuma, I can't move! Piggyback ride, please."

Well, I was happy to do that much for her. She'd earned it this time.

"Please, allow me," Mitsurugi said, backing toward her. "You'll be quite safe on my back, and—"

"No, thank you," Megumin said flatly. "Come on, quick, Kazuma, the ground is cold!" It felt pretty good to see her shoot down Hunkazoid like that.

"Don't worry, I'm coming. Hup!"

"She chose Kazuma Sato...over me...!"

"Bah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Kazuma beat you! You suck!" Dust said. It was just one more shock for Mitsurugi, but I ignored him and resumed my climb up Worm Mountain.

We didn't run into any monsters, but very wild vegetables popped out of the ground what felt like every other minute. Nonetheless, we forged ahead until we were almost at the summit.

"I still can't believe we're having this much trouble with *vegetables!*" I fumed.

"Yeah, who ever heard of being killed by vegetables?" Aqua added.

"As long as I have Decoy active, all their attacks will fall on me...! Go, Decoy!" Darkness spread her arms wide, and all the local

vegetation came rushing at her. “Ahhhhhh!”

“Quick, do ’em in while Darkness has them distracted!”

“Using a woman as bait? Ugh! Hold fast; I’ll soon dispatch them!”

Hey, Mitsurugi, no need to hurry.

“Ah! It brings back wonderful memories of the day Axel’s cabbages stripped off my armor...”

See?

4

“Phew... You’re finally awake. Are you okay, Darkness?” Aqua asked.

“Those cabbages were great and all, but these even harder vegetables were a whole new level... I’m glad... I’m so glad I got to experience this! Ha-ha-ha!”

We were catching our breath after eliminating our leafy foes. Aqua and Megumin were pitching the defeated flora into a bonfire, resulting in lovely roasted vegetables. I was told veggies that were this full of vitality were also very tasty.

“You sound awfully exuberant for someone who was at death’s door a minute ago—thanks to some vegetables, no less.” I’d been desperate for a break, though, so I guess it worked out. I could enjoy some fresh-cooked produce and warm myself up a little.

“There they are, Lord Daniel! It’s them!”

I saw a pair of very ragged figures not far away. One of them was pointing at us.

“And here I thought my explosion had ended the both of you. You are very bad at dying, did you know that?”

“Indeed. And thanks to you shooting down our wyvern, we had to walk the rest of the way,” Daniel grumbled. I was amazed they’d survived the fall after the explosion. That was some drop—they really were durable.

“So you’re Daniel and Charlie. Well, you’re not going any farther. Mitsurugi, great hero and possessor of the enchanted blade, stands before you!”

“Way to go, great hero! You’re just as heroic as I’d hoped! You’re super awesome, great hero!”

“Kazuma Sato... I find myself unsettled somehow, hearing you call me that.”

“Kazuma is quite quick to throw away his pride if it will make his life easier,” Megumin observed.

Damn right, kiddo.

“Hoh... So you’re the one. The famous wielder of the enchanted blade Gram,” said Daniel.

“Indeed, I am. And with me here, know that you have climbed

your last mountainside! Together, this blade and I have buried even an Ancient Dragon, and you'll fare no better! Take this! Yaaaah!"

He jumped up high and swept down at Daniel and Charlie with Gram. Perfect! *Kill 'em, guy! In fact, if you wiped each other out, that would be cool, too!*

"Hmm! I see. Yes, that is fine swordplay."

"If we took one of those swings right on the noggin—huh?"

Daniel had dodged Gram's slash and was offering his admiration, but Charlie seemed startled by something.

"What the...? Is the earth shaking?" Mitsurugi, still holding tight to his sword, which was buried in the ground, looked at his feet.

What was that, an earthquake? There was some pretty serious shaking going on.

"Yo, the bedrock's not so stable around here. Maybe don't go usin', like, your most devastating attacks or whatever," Dust said. He was starting to back away even as he gave us his warning.

"I thank you for that advice kindly, Dust," Mitsurugi said. "But... maybe you could have mentioned that just a little soonerrrrrrr!" The ground in front of Gram gave way, and Mitsurugi, Daniel, and Charlie tumbled toward the bottom of the mountain.

"Grraaah!" Daniel yelled.

I heard Charlie say, "I guess he got the better of us that time, huh?"

"Hrgh! I'm okay... Forget about me! Go on ahead!" grunted Mitsurugi.

Well, this was lucky. Mitsurugi's sacrifice had gotten Daniel and Charlie off the battlefield.

"If you say so!" Aqua chirped.

"Let us put him out of our minds and go forward," Megumin added. They were just doing what he'd told them to.

"All right, maybe you could be a *little* concerned about me!"

5

As the sun began to sink, it became obvious we would have to camp out on the mountain for the night.

"I recovered most of my magic thanks to those nice, fresh vegetables," Megumin said. I found it somehow irritating that such villainous vegetables turned out to be so tasty.

I was off by myself, setting up a tent, when Aqua sidled up to me. "Say, Kazuma. Something's been bothering me..." She was fidgeting as she spoke.

"You need to go to the bathroom? Yeah, the cold makes it hard to hold, doesn't it? Just use the bushes over there or something."

“No! It’s about that ancient weapon...”

“Oh. Thor’s Hammer and Járngreipr or whatever. Yeah? What about them?”

“Well, uh, they just sound kind of...familiar. The whole time we’ve been climbing, I’ve been trying to remember why.”

I’d thought she looked kind of funny on the way up, staring at the sky with a weird expression. So that’s what she’d been thinking about.

“And then I finally remembered! Those are cheat items that I gave to one of my reincarnates! It was someone who came through a long time ago—I’d forgotten all about it.”

“Huh! You don’t say.” Her eyes were sparkling. Maybe she wanted me to compliment her for remembering. I smiled and beckoned her over. She trotted right up to me, suspecting nothing—and I dropped a knuckle right on her head.

“Owwwwww! What was that for?!”

“For being a complete idiot! How could you forget something so crucial until *now*?! I thought those activation criteria were bizarre, but now it all makes sense! Daniel’s been after *your* stupid cheat items!”

“B-but those items were only supposed to work for the person I gave them to! I made it so other people could only use them if they met very specific activation conditions!”

She puffed out her chest, but I jabbed her repeatedly in the cheek with my pointer finger. “Yes! And *you* fulfilled them!”

She was the reason we were in this mess! It was her fault an almost general of the Demon King had gotten his hands on an ancient weapon and then had been able to use it. Why was I always, always cleaning up her messes?!

I put my head in my hands and groaned—when there came a noise from the bushes.

“Thank goodness I finally caught up with you!”

““““Lia?!”””” we all exclaimed at this most unexpected visitor.

“What are you doing here?” I said. It didn’t look like Cielo and Erika were with her. I couldn’t believe she’d followed us all by herself.

“I’ve been thinking ever since you left, and I just can’t make you deal with this without me. The revival of that ancient weapon was ultimately my fault.”

“I told you not to worry about it. You need to be practicing so you can win that contest.”

“That’s exactly why I’m here. When I think about how none of this would have happened if I hadn’t been kidnapped, I just can’t focus on the contest.”

I knew Lia had a strong sense of responsibility, but I hadn’t expected it to run quite this deep. Aqua and the others could really stand to take a page from her book.

“That’s why I want you to bring me with you, Kazuma. Because I have no hope in the contest if I go there with unfinished business...”

“Okay,” I said after a moment. “You’ve come this far—I can’t really send you home now. Let’s work together to put Thor’s Hammer out of action. And then we’ll go conquer that contest!”

And clear my massive debts!

So Lia joined our party again as night on Worm Mountain wore on.

6

The journey was relatively smooth as we worked our way ever closer to the summit.

“Aren’t we there yet?” I griped. “The vegetables keep getting stronger...”

“My feet feel like they’re going to fall off! How long have we been climbing?” Aqua added.

“Hang in there... It can’t be much farther,” said Lia. Unlike us, she was working her way resolutely ahead, conspicuously *not* complaining.

“I’m hoping we can make one final push, reach the top, and find Járngreipr,” Darkness said, picking up her pace to match Lia’s.

“About that.” Lia said. “Once we find Járngreipr...what do we do with them?”

“The ideal solution would be to just destroy them, but if they can handle the lightning from Thor’s Hammer, I’m not sure I see us being able to smash them,” I said. I didn’t add that the question hadn’t even occurred to me until Lia asked.

“Ha-ha-ha! Then allow me to demonstrate the power of my explosion magic!” said Megumin.

“Maybe don’t. I’ve got a bad feeling about that,” I said.

“How dare you?!”

Anyway, firing off an explosion on top of a mountain seemed like an avalanche risk.

“In that case, maybe we could put them somewhere Daniel won’t be able to get at them,” Darkness suggested. “How about the treasury at the royal castle? They would be a lot better guarded in the capital than in Axel.”

On the one hand, it seemed like since Aqua had brought these items here, maybe she could just seal them up again. On the other, thinking about how things had gone so far...maybe not.

“That might be a realistic solution. I’ll be counting on you to work your connections in the capital, eh, Young Miss Lalatina?”

“D-don’t call me Lalatina!”

As we talked, we got closer and closer to our destination, and several hours later, we had finally reached the peak of the mountain.

“Huff... Puff... Ugh! This is killing me! The air’s so thin up here!”

“You can do it, Kazuma! It’s not your fault you’re a former NEET shut-in with absolutely no physical strength or endurance...”

“I-I’m...not...a NEET shut-in! And anyway, I’m just a normal guy with normal stats, unlike you advanced class types!”

“Anything that can be used to handle an ancient weapon must be extremely cool! My heart races with anticipation!”

Okay. We were here. So where was this Járngreipr? I looked around, but all I saw was snow, snow, snow.

“Mwah-ha-ha-ha-ha! We finally made it!”

I knew that voice!

“Huff... Huff... You completely abandoned a party member caught in a landslide so you could keep going! That’s despicable! And you call yourselves human?!”

So it was time for Daniel and Charlie to make their grand reentrance.

“I take it from your expressions that you haven’t found them yet. Well, too bad for you—you’re out of time. Step aside. We shall be the ones to find Járngreipr,” Daniel said. He started forward, but Darkness moved to block him.

“You think we’ll get out of your way just because you asked us to? If you really want to get past me, you’ll have to hit me with a bolt of lightning from your weapon! I’ve never been struck by lightning before... Ah! How long will my body be able to endure?!” She started to squirm with the anticipation of a fresh sensation.

“I certainly shall not. I’m here retrieving Járngreipr precisely because the lightning will be too much for me if I don’t. Now, once again, if you would be so kind as to make way.”

“You’re not going another step! Get away from Lady Aqua and her friends! Did you think you could escape the enchanted blade Gram so easily? This is where we finish things!”

Who should appear at that moment but Mitsurugi? I guess he’d been chasing after Daniel and Charlie.

“Hey, you! Put a little *effort* into slowing them down, why don’t you? I thought the great hero would at least buy us a bit of time!” I said.

“Yes, he’s right! They’ve already caught up to us!” Aqua added.

“Gnnrr! Kazuma Sato! And even you, Lady Aqua...!” He must have been feeling tired, because he was leaning on his magic sword like it was his magic walking stick—but he was still upright somehow.

“You may be my foe, but credit where credit is due—I’m impressed a mere human was able to keep pace with us. Frankly, I

think you could stand to be a little more exhausted... Hrm?"

Suddenly, there was another tremor from beneath our feet. I thought Daniel had caused it, but he was obviously as surprised as I was.

"Wh-what is this shaking? Wait, what's that?!" Megumin exclaimed. As if in response, something gigantic burst out of the snow.

It was a green sphere with a woven pattern on the surface, and it gave off a rich, sweet smell.

"Look at the size of it!" Darkness said. "There's no question—even royalty rarely gets a muskmelon as big as that!"

Seriously? Another of these bizarro plants?! *I'm so sick of this world!*

"I will cook it with my magic!"

"Hold up, Explosion Girl. If that's a top-quality muskmelon, then we'll get a bigger payday if we capture it in one piece, don't you think?"

I'd been getting ready to fight fast and fight hard, but Dust's question stopped me in my tracks. Darkness said even royals didn't see the likes of this thing very often...

"All right," I shouted, "we take it alive! Absolutely no—"

"Explooooooosiiion!"

"Oh, for—!"

Megumin wasn't even listening to me. Her blast enveloped the entire mountaintop, vaporizing the high-quality muskmelon. The leftover pieces of it weren't even big enough to eat.

Melon juice started raining out of the sky. Dust opened his mouth and caught some on his tongue. "Hey! That juice... It's *good!*"

"I can't believe you did that," I grumbled to Megumin. "I wish you would listen to people when they talk!"

"Why are you so upset? I defeated it, did I not?" Megumin asked from the snowy ground, where she lay looking awfully pleased with herself. That explosion was the linchpin of our attack strategy, and she'd used it up!

Maybe I would just leave her here.

"If you would please hurry and put me on your back? It's rather cold on the ground. Thanks to me, the danger has passed, and we can now resume our search for Járngreipr."

"I'm afraid that ship has sailed. You're one step behind."

I turned toward the calm, cool voice to find Daniel grinning and wearing a pair of black gloves.

"Those gloves," I said. "Don't tell me..."

"Lord Daniel, you did it!"

"Hrn...! While we were distracted by the melon, he...! That was a low-down, dirty trick!" Mitsurugi raged.

Daniel just gave a little shrug. “Words can never hurt me. Especially *your* words about who’s low-down or dirty. The long-sought Járngreipr are mine at last! Now I can wield the true power of Thor’s Hammer!”

“If Daniel can do that lightning thing like he did at the castle whenever he wants now, we definitely have no hope of beating him,” I said. “All right, people! Tactical withdrawal!”

“Mwah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! After all the times you’ve tried to stop me, you think I’d simply let you get away? Strike forth, my lightning!”

“What? No— No! Ahhhhh!”

Thunderbolts came flying at Megumin, who was mustering all her strength just to stand up.

“Megumin, watch out! Arrrrghh!”

An instant before the bolts struck, Lia shoved her out of the way.

“Liaaaaaa!”

One of the bolts from Thor’s Hammer hit Lia right in the chest.

“Kazuma! Kazuma, what do we do?! Lia... She was protecting me...!”

Megumin was starting to lose it. I shoved her aside and rushed up to Lia. “Lia! Hey, Lia! Stay with me! Open your eyes!”

“Ah— Ahhh... I never meant to hurt my Lia...” Daniel seemed more shaken than any of us. It looked like it had never crossed his mind that Lia might try to save Megumin.

“Shit! She’s not breathing!” I said.

“Aqua, come here, quickly! Please!” Megumin said. Yeah. Aqua would fix everything. She could bring people back from the dead!

“No... Lia... Dead?” Daniel fell to his knees, horrified. “Rrrraahhhhh! What have I...what have I done?! I killed my own *oshi*! This world has never witnessed such an atrocious deed! All that’s left is for me to die...”

He stood with hollow eyes and lifted Thor’s Hammer, preparing to hit himself in the head.

“Lord Daniel, calm down!” Charlie was very agitated, but I didn’t have time for him. “Hrn! I can’t stand to see you like this, Lord Daniel! And just when you’d finally gotten the power to use Thor’s Hammer... We need to get out of here!”

“Hrrraaahhhh! Liiiiiaaaaaa!”

“Come on, Lord Daniel! You can’t keep crying forever—we’ve got to go!”

Charlie picked up Daniel, who showed no sign of moving himself, and set off running.

They were gone, and the threat from Thor’s Hammer was gone with them, at least for now.

Mitsurugi was the only one of us who was particularly distraught.

“Argh! What kind of hero am I? I couldn’t even protect one of my own comrades! I... I don’t deserve to be called a great hero!”

Aqua, meanwhile, held out her hands and intoned, “*Resurrection!*” A gentle light embraced Lia.

“Huh...? Where am I?” she said.

“Back with us? You sure know your magic, if nothing else,” said Dust.

“Wow. Is this what it looked like when I was resurrected?” I wondered aloud. As people with firsthand experience of Resurrection, Dust and I took it in stride; Megumin and Darkness had seen it happen before and were equally blasé. Only Mitsurugi was seeing it for the first time, and his mouth was hanging open. “Wha...?”

“This is easy peasy for someone like me! I’m a goddess, after all!” said Aqua.

“B-but of course, Lady Aqua! How could I have doubted?” Seeing a bona fide miracle with his own eyes was making Mitsurugi’s devotion to Aqua that much blinder.

“Lia? Do you know your name? Do you understand where you are?” Megumin asked.

Lia, though, didn’t say anything and didn’t respond to her name. She just sort of stared into space.

“Hold on, this doesn’t seem right. Let’s try again. Do you know where we are?” I held up my pointer finger in front of the lethargic young woman and moved it back and forth, but her eyes didn’t follow it.

Then, abruptly, she said, “I remember.”

Why was I getting a bad feeling about this?

“Oh! You mean you got your memories back?” Aqua said.

Memories? Aqua sounded like all this made perfect sense to her, but I didn’t know what they were talking about.

“Lia told me about it when we were kidnapped together,” Aqua explained. “She said all her memories from more than two years ago are a blank.”

Come to think of it, she’d mentioned something about missing memories when I’d asked her about why she became a dancer.

“Yes... I remember everything! The reason I’m in this world...”

Geez, that sounded like something Megumin would be thrilled to hear—which made me think something had gone wrong with the resurrection. I decided to play along for the time being. “*This world?*” I asked.

Lia nodded, then looked at Aqua and me, almost like she was seeing old friends.

Chapter Six

1

It was a few days after Daniel had swiped Járngreipr from us on Worm Mountain. Aqua, Darkness, Megumin, and I were with the Axel Hearts in the front room of their house, talking about what to do.

Megumin said, “Daniel and Charlie are showing considerable restraint. Daniel has the ability to use Thor’s Hammer at will now, and yet...”

“They haven’t come to attack us, and there’s no sign that they’re causing trouble somewhere else. I’m grateful for the respite, but it’s a little...unsettling,” Darkness said.

“He really seemed shocked when Lia died. Maybe he’s still not over it,” Aqua suggested.

It wasn’t like I wanted Daniel to go on a rampage or anything, but I had to agree: Things were a little *too* quiet. “Well, whatever is making Daniel keep a low profile, it means the dancing contest in the capital should be able to go ahead.”

Erika and Cielo, who’d been listening silently, spoke up. “About that,” Erika said. “There’s one little problem...”

“Problem?”

“The contest is almost here, but Lia won’t come out of her room.”

“We’d really hoped we could do a little more practice together. We don’t know what to do,” Cielo said.

Ever since that day on Worm Mountain, Lia had kept to herself in her room—in fact, she’d hardly spoken at all. I thought I had an idea why.

“Lia’s been acting strange ever since she got her memories back on Worm Mountain,” said Aqua. “Do you think she’s all right? Is she eating?” She sounded just like a worried parent.

“I think she has an appetite,” said Erika. “I put her meals outside her door, and I find empty plates there later.”

“And she must be going to the bathroom, even though she does it when we won’t see her. She leaves notes if there are things she wants and stuff,” Cielo added.

She’s nothing but a regular old shut-in! Yuck, it was practically like they were talking about *my* past self...

“With Lia in such bad shape, I think our only choice is to withdraw from the con—”

“Absolutely not! You’ve worked so hard to get here—you can’t just give up!” I exclaimed. That billion-eris prize was riding on the Axel Hearts! We’d all worked so hard for this! Especially me!

“I appreciate the thought, but I’m not sure there’s anything we can do about this...” Erika was despondent.

“You listen to me. Only the eight groups that pass the regional qualifiers get to go on to the main event. The dreams of thousands of other dancers are riding on your shoulders!” I said.

“What?!” Erika and Cielo said, their faces the epitome of shock.

“This isn’t just about you. For all those girls whose dreams were shattered, you have to go to that contest and put on the best damn show you can!”

“Y-you’re right. We were only thinking about ourselves. You’re incredible, Kazuma,” said Cielo.

To be fair, I was *also* only thinking about myself. But I said, “Your producer is watching. Show me how you can shine!”

““Yes sir, Mr. Producer!”” they said, beaming. It made life so easy, the way these two just got on board. Such a change of pace from my usual three.

“What is that look? Do you have some sort of problem?” Megumin asked. She must have noticed me looking at her.

“Naw, nothing.”

“Producer...? Wait, is Kazuma here?” We heard a door open, and then Lia came out of her room. The color in her cheeks was good, and she didn’t even look especially haggard.

“Your passion even reached Lia!” Erika said, tears of joy beading up in her eyes. I guess that little pep talk really worked.

“Lia, the contest is almost here. Let’s practice together!” said Cielo.

“Practice... Right. But first, I’ve got something important to talk about with Aqua and Kazuma. Would you two come into my room?”

“You want to talk to Kazuma and...me?” Aqua said. She looked as disturbed as I felt.

Lia’s room was so thoroughly trashed that it looked like we had never even cleaned. Carefully watching our steps, Aqua and I worked our way inside. I knew this was how she’d been living! This was why I’d been so annoyed!

“D-do we really have to talk in *here*?” I said.

“W-well, it’s really important, and I don’t want anyone else to overhear us...”

Secret chat, huh? She could at least crack open a window.

“I get it! You want to join the Axis Church, and you’re hoping I’ll

put in a good word for you!" Aqua said.

"I guarantee that's not why we're here," I said. Aqua came at me, so I fought back.

The sight of us wrangling didn't stop Lia from getting into the conversation at her own rhythm. "I remembered," she said.

"Oh yeah. You said something about your memories coming back," I said. "That's good, right?"

"I'm sure your friends and family are all worried about you. Have you gotten in touch with them yet?" Aqua asked.

"I don't have any family in this world," Lia said.

"In *this* world?" I echoed. Those words nagged at me.

"I'm just going to say it," said Lia. "I came here from Japan."

Aqua clapped her hands and nodded vigorously. "That's it! I *knew* you looked familiar from somewhere, Lia! I just didn't knnoooooowwwwwwwwwww!"

"Whaaaaaat?!" I shouted as loud as Aqua.

"I came here from Japan," Lia repeated.

"You're kidding! But then again, you've got the black hair... You could definitely pass for Japanese." Now that I thought about it, her facial features looked pretty Japanese, too. I hadn't been sure, because for all the outrageous hair colors and funny faces in this world, some people looked pretty much like anyone you might meet in Japan.

"Given your name is Kazuma Sato, I assume you're like me. That's why I thought I could tell you. And Aqua... Or should I say, Lady Aqua? You *are* a real goddess, aren't you? I think I met you when I first came here."

"Ohhh yeah! Of course! Sure, I remember you! I would never, ever forget something so important!" She was nodding even harder than before. She'd obviously forgotten completely. "It feels funny to have you calling me Lady Aqua now. You can just call me Aqua."

"All right, thank you. I will."

I was still flabbergasted, but this definitely answered a lot of questions.

Wait. But if this was all true... "So you got your memories back. That's great, right? Why're you holed up in your room?" I asked.

"I just feel so lost. I'm not sure it's *right* for me to continue as a dancer. Could I talk to you about it?"

Aqua and I both nodded. Lia set her stuffed toy Konjiro to one side and started talking very seriously. "I actually was a pop idol in my former life in Japan."

"What, seriously?! Uh, if you don't mind me asking, what was your name?" If she'd been with some famous group, maybe I could get her autograph.

"I wasn't anyone you'd know. Just one face in a big group."

Yeah—until recently, large groups of girls had been all the rage with pop crews. So Lia had been one of them.

“I worked hard at my lessons as a trainee, and when they told me I could have my debut, I was so happy...” She smiled kind of sadly as she spoke. She was really getting lost in the memories.

“So that’s why you’re so good at singing and dancing,” said Aqua.

“But one day, I got a throat infection. I wasn’t able to sing anymore. That sent me into a deep depression, and to top it all off, I got hit by a car...and wound up in this world.”

“Sounds a lot like my story,” I said. We shared a painful past.

“Strictly speaking, you didn’t die in a traffic accident, Kazuma. You died from shock after you mistakenly jumped in front of a truck.”

“You’re the worst!” I said. Wouldn’t it have been kinder to keep that to herself?

“Uh... Moving on,” Lia said with a cough. Seeing how serious she was, Aqua and I both clammed up. “I was thrilled to find I could sing again when I got here. I wanted to sing and dance, just like I always had.” She smiled again, this time from the heart. It was the kind of smile that could make a guy fall in love. “But I’d been reincarnated here—I had a duty to defeat the Demon King and save this world. I’d been in the *naginata* club in school, so I decided to work on being a spear user here.”

From the ancient Japanese halberd to a Western-style spear, huh? Unlike me, Lia had decided to get serious about taking down the Demon King. Very admirable.

“You’re very admirable, unlike Kazuma,” Aqua chirped. She was right, but that didn’t mean I liked hearing it from her.

“But...” A cloud came over Lia’s expression. “Once, the wagon I was riding on was attacked by monsters. I was thrown from the wagon and fell down a cliff. I was left with no memory of my name, who I was, or that I was reincarnated from Japan... It wasn’t long after that when I met Cielo and Erika. They were trying to become dancers.”

Boy, and I thought I’d had it rough in this world. Lia had had her share of suffering, too.

“I guess your body remembers some things that your brain doesn’t. When Cielo and Erika saw how I sang and danced, they invited me to join them. I was so happy—they were the first real friends I’d made since I came here.”

So that was when they’d met. It was like the polar opposite of the two party members I’d met here. Not to mention the one I’d dragged along with me... I looked at Aqua and heaved a sigh.

“Uh, what’s going on, Kazuma? Why are you sighing?”

I wish I’d met some serious, decent people in this world!

“So that’s the story,” I said.

“Come to think of it, you said Lia was a name you adopted after you lost your memories, right? What’s your real name?” Aqua asked.

“My real name doesn’t matter. I’m used to Lia now. Here’s the more important question: Is it really all right for me to continue being a dancer?”

That was what had been getting her so down lately?

“You want to quit dancing?” I asked.

“Not at all! But having been reincarnated here... I just feel like I should be working to defeat the Demon King as soon as humanly possible.”

Huh... I’d never thought of that question. Not once in my life! Let the Mitsurugis of the world handle the Demon King.

“That’s so wonderful! You’re so dedicated to completing the hero’s duty that I gave you!” Aqua said, deeply moved. Her eyes were shining—and for some reason, she kept glancing in my direction.

No... Don’t look at me...

“But if working toward that goal makes you so unhappy, that feels wrong somehow... What is it you really want to do, Lia?” Aqua asked.

“What do *I* want to do?”

“If you have cares, live for pleasure in this moment. Let yourself be swept away down the easiest path. Don’t restrain yourself, but follow your instincts!”

Lia caught her breath, and her expression brightened a little. Aqua’s Axis creed was completely outrageous, but it seemed to resonate with her.

“Heh-heh! That’s one of the Axis Church’s most important teachings!” Aqua said.

“Aqua...!” said Lia.



“I know I’m not one to talk, given that I just want to spend my days in peace and quiet, but you heard it straight from the goddess’s mouth—maybe it’s okay to prioritize what you want to do. Being a dancer was what helped you meet your friends, right? And us, too. Cielo and Erika both want you to keep dancing, y’know?” I had to get Lia back on her feet and back on Team Win the Contest, or I wasn’t going to get anywhere. I went on, “There’s one thing you can do—march out of this room and let Cielo and Erika know you’re still with them. And then go win that contest!”

“Kazuma...!” Lia looked at me, the life in her eyes completely restored, and then she gave my hand a vigorous shake.

Perfect! We were back on the road to debt freedom!

2

With Cielo’s and Erika’s encouragement, Lia resumed her practice, day after busy day. And then, finally, it was the first day of the big contest.

I’d dragged Aqua, Megumin, and Darkness with me in hopes of making the place as lively as I could for the girls. “You know why you’re here, right?” I asked my party members. “To cheer for the Axel Hearts.”

“I know that!” Aqua snapped. “This contest is set up tournament-style, and they have to put on a show, right? Which means we have to cheer for them!”

“I feel a little funny knowing that Daniel hasn’t shown his face even once this whole time... But the contest comes first!” Darkness said.

“Let us make this first day of the contest one they will never forget!” Megumin said. “I will show the people of the capital the power of my explosion!”

“Please, please do that outside of town.”

I left the three of them in the spectator seating and went to the greenroom. It was a big space, shared by all the competitors, and at the moment it crackled with tension. Every one of the performers somehow looked to me like the biggest of big bads. As for the Axel Hearts, they were holding their own. Maybe it was all the experience they’d had so far—they looked nervous but not overwhelmed.

“It’s finally time for the big day, you three. Let’s prove all that brutal training wasn’t for nothing! Let’s show them what you can really do!” I said, dropping some passion on them.

“That’s the plan! Everyone’s gonna see that I’m the cutest one

around!" said Erika.

"Oh... What am I gonna do? There's so many men here... I h-hope I don't accidentally punch one of them..." That was Cielo.

"Yeah, please don't. The last thing we want is to get kicked out for assaulting an audience member," I said. Our saving grace was that it was all women performing. If there had been any male groups, I don't think I could have watched for fear of what might happen.

"And I'll sing my very best, too...to help Cielo and Erika's dreams come true!" Lia said.

The Axel Hearts formed a circle and gave a shout. The curtain was about to rise on the dancing contest.

3

The Axel Hearts and I were waiting in the greenroom. "All right, it's almost time. Let's go over the rules one more time to make sure we're on the same page," I said.

The eight groups that had been selected to participate in this contest would face off in rounds, two groups at a time. The four teams that survived these eliminations would then all dance against one another in the finals.

Explanation finished, I told the girls to catch a quick break before the show started. As if on cue, the door to the greenroom opened, and Darkness came in, looking around. "Kazuma, are you here? I need your help with something..."

"Darkness? What's going on? Why are you so upset?"

"A message just came from the castle. It's something about Daniel, so I wanted you to come with me."

"Yeah... All right. I'll be right there," I said. This didn't sound like something I could ignore. I turned to the Axel Hearts. "I've gotta duck out and deal with some stuff. I'll be back about the time the show is starting—you just get ready."

4

Darkness and I were in a room at the castle, getting the lowdown from someone who looked like a servant of the king.

"We deeply appreciate you taking a few moments for us at such a busy time. And it will be only a few moments; we shall keep the explanation brief, concise, and to the point so as not to detain you in the midst of your work." He went on: "First, let us extend our sincere gratitude for your report of the other day. We deeply appreciate knowing that there is an ancient weapon on the loose that could

threaten our very nation.”

“Sure! Of course! We tried to stop him; we really did! But we were just a *second* too late, and the enemy managed to complete the ritual!” I said. The last thing I wanted was for them to have any idea that we were the cause of the whole problem.

“I must apologize profusely; the ritual succeeded because of my party m—”

I slapped my hand over Darkness’s mouth before that idiot could tell the honest truth. Why would she do that?!

“Darkness! I’m *trying* to explain. This is one of those times you should let me, the party leader, handle everything!”

D-dammit, don’t resist me with your freakish strength!

“Kazuma, you dirty— Ahhh!”

I sucked vitality out of her with Drain Touch until she couldn’t fight back anymore. Yes, it was Aqua’s fault the ritual had succeeded, but we would keep that to ourselves. Otherwise, I was sure we would be on the hook for damages...

“Er... May I continue? Ahem. We summarily and with much expedience dispatched a messenger to conduct our own investigation amid much secrecy, with the result that Daniel, former candidate for general of the Demon King, was adjudged to be a highly dangerous personage...and a reward of five hundred million eris offered for him.”

“F-five hundred...mil...!”

“In furtherance of this matter, and in light of your established record of victory over generals of the Demon King, good Kazuma, we wish to request that you defeat Daniel as well.”

In other words, if I could win the contest and take down Daniel, too, I’d repay my debts and have change to spare! I would go from rags to riches in an instant!

“Heh-heh-heh!” I said. “You’re right—I, Kazuma Sato, have rich experience of laying low the Demon King’s generals. Just leave everything to me!”

5

“It’s fair enough—Daniel’s been keeping his head down recently, but I guess he’s still plenty dangerous. We should take him out ourselves, and quickly,” Darkness said.

“Yeah. Plus we’ll get five hundred million eris for doing it. But anyway, contest first!”

We headed back to the theater, visions of a bright future dancing in my head, and I opened the door to the greenroom in high spirits. I sang out, “I’m back, everyone! Are you ready to dance?”

Only silence greeted me. What did they all look so down about? Were they nervous again?

“Hey, come on, guys, it’s almost time to get started! Don’t you need to change?”

Lia came over to me looking like she was at the end of her rope. “Kazuma... It’s awful!”

“What is? What’s awful?” I asked.

Cielo jumped in before Lia could answer. “Our costumes... They’re gone!”

“Oh, I see. Your costumes are...*gone*?!” That sure explained why no one was changed anyway!

“Kazuma, what are we gonna *do*? We can’t find our super-ultra-adorable costumes anywhere!” Erika said.

“Keep a cool head, Erika,” I instructed. “You have to think! Did you, like, forget them anywhere or leave them with anyone?”

“We would never! The bag with our outfits in it was sitting against that wall a moment ago!”

So the costumes had disappeared in just the last few minutes. “Maybe it’s some kind of prank? Or maybe a fan made off with them? Arrgh! You know what? Forget it! Go out there dressed just like you are!” It might cost them points with the judges or the audience, but it would be better than not going out at all.

“I’m afraid we can’t. You’re only allowed to perform in the costumes you registered before the event. If we don’t find them, we’ll be forced to withdraw...,” Lia said.

Suddenly I heard Megumin say, “Withdraw? You mean we won’t get to see you and your friends perform, Lia?” She and Chris were standing there with us—I thought they were supposed to be in the audience.

“Megumin? Chris? What are you doing here?” I asked.

“We came to give a few words of encouragement before the big show,” Megumin said. “Is there nothing we can do?”

“Search me. Hey, I get why you’re here, Megumin, but where’d you come from, Chris?”

“Oh, I just bumped into Megumin and followed her here.”

“She seems very interested in what you’re doing,” Megumin added. That was unexpected. Here I thought she didn’t like being in front of crowds.

You could be forgiven for thinking Chris was a young man from her build, although her face was that of a beautiful woman. Hmm... She had a certain something that the Axel Hearts lacked at the moment. Her looks might help draw in female fans. But were girls even interested in pop groups in this world?

“All right, sounds good,” I said. “I’m busy at the moment, so we’ll

have the interview tonight.”

“Uh, I don’t think this conversation is going where I thought it would! What I’m interested in is your producer work! It sounds like you’re making money hand over fist.”

Oh, that.

Oh—*that*! Chris was a thief—she would be perfect!

“I hate to bother you, Chris, but I need your help!” I said.

“Well, that’s sudden. I assume you’re talking about the missing costumes? Sure. Count me in.”

6

“From the footprints at the scene, I think our costume thief went this way,” Chris said. She was jogging through town, and I was following close behind.

“You can even tell that? It really does take a thief to catch a thief!”

“They’re not a thief, they’re a common burglar! But it is odd...”

“What?” Megumin asked. I had the same question. What was wrong?

“These footprints, all their tracks. They don’t look...human.”

Not human? Well, I could think of someone *not human* that I’d dealt with recently...

“Oh! Look over there! Is that not the Axel Hearts’ costumes?!” Megumin pointed to some very large, hooded men. They were clutching the girls’ outfits. “Hey, you! The suspicious guys! Give back Lia and her friends’ costumes!”

I reached out and held her back. “Hold up, Megumin! Something isn’t right about—”

That was when the men pulled back their hoods.

“““Grrraaaahhhh!”””

“Trolls?! That doesn’t look like Charlie and Daniel, but they’re definitely the ones who made off with the props.”

Charlie and Daniel had proven a lot for us to handle, but these guys I thought we might be able to take.

“Hey, trolls!” I shouted. “Those outfits belong to my cash cows—er, I mean, Lia and her friends! Give ’em back!” I let loose an arrow with my Deadeye skill, landing my shot in the shoulder of the troll holding the outfits.

“That dense formation—it’s like they’re *begging* me to blast them! May I please blast them? I can, can’t I?!” Megumin said.

“Of course not! We’re in the middle of the royal capital! This isn’t Axel—you can’t just go firing off explosions any old where!”

“Uh, I’m pretty sure you can’t do that in Axel, either...,” Chris

said, looking distraught. She put a defeated hand to her forehead.

“Grrr, we will not be captured! We must get these, at least, to Lord Daniel...!”

“You’re not getting away!” I shouted.

Chris grabbed the costumes the troll had dropped on the ground. Guess that arrow really did the trick. “I’ve got them! This is what we’re after, right, Kazuma?”

“Huh. No troll-bashing today, I guess. The costumes are more important!”

That one troll, though—he’d mentioned Daniel, hadn’t he? Or had I imagined that?

7

“Thank you all for your patience. The next group to grace the stage of our dance contest is a three-person act from the town of Axel. Please welcome the Axel Hearts!” The MC, whose getup was even more glittery than the performers’, gave a great sweep of his hand as Lia, Erika, and Cielo charged onto the stage from the wings.

“Hey, everyone! We’re the Axel Hearts—and once you see how cute we are, you’ll never be able to look away!” Erika enthused.

“I’ll do the very best I can, so p-please cheer for me!” said Cielo.

We’d made it back in time somehow. Now it was up to Lia and the others to give the performance of their lives!

“Just listen to our song... This is the Axel Hearts’ Bright Show!” Lia said, and then they went into a perfectly synchronized and rehearsed song and dance routine. The audience was enraptured, and the judges definitely looked like this was making a favorable impression.

8

It was the first night of the dance contest, and we were at the Axel Hearts’ hotel ready to celebrate their success. We bumped into Erika and Cielo in the main hall, and we all headed for Lia’s room together.

“What a great show Lia put on,” Cielo said. She was about to knock on the door to Lia’s room when she stopped short. The door was ajar, and we could hear Lia talking inside.

“Thank you, Konjiro. I really do love singing,” she said. “Maybe it’s because this was my first show since getting my memories back, and—well, it doesn’t hurt that we won. But it felt even better than usual just to sing.” Her voice was an octave higher than usual; she must have really been in a good mood.

“I could really *feel* how much you love singing, Lia! You did a great job. I knew you could do it if you put your mind to it!” said... Lia, in a slightly different voice.

“Oh, please, there’s no need to flatter me. You’ll embarrass me!”

So she was one of *those* types.

I thought the most polite thing might be to not disturb her, but just as I turned on my heel to leave, a gust of wind blew the door open. Lia was there, hugging her stuffed fox. Our eyes met. She froze.

“H-hey...,” I said.

“K-Kazuma?! Cielo! Erika! How long have you been there...?”

“Uh... Sorry,” I said, somehow feeling compelled to apologize in the awkward moment.

“What are you so embarrassed about, Lia?” Erika said. “We’ve seen you talking to your stuffed animal a million times b—”

“He’s not a stuffed animal! He’s Konjiro!”

“We know how important Konjiro is to you, Lia,” Cielo said.

“He is... When I was adventuring by myself, he was my only comfort... And after I lost my memories, Konjiro was there for me. You could almost call him the fourth member of the Axel Hearts.”

“I’m, uh, not sure I’d go that far,” I said. We didn’t need any members who couldn’t sing or dance. “But hey, he’s a great mascot.”

Hold on. The whole fact that Lia cherished Konjiro so much... Could it be she’d received him when she came to this world?

“D-don’t tell me,” I said. “Is Konjiro a cheat item?”

“Cheat? I don’t even know what you’re asking, Kazuma,” Erika said. As a born and raised inhabitant of this world, it was understandable if she didn’t follow.

Lia, though, understood right away and shook her head. “No, not him. My item...was this magical keyboard.” She reached into a big bag and put a musical instrument with black-and-white keys on the table—an electric keyboard. This was what she’d come over here with? That must mean it had some amazing power, like Gram the enchanted sword.

“So, Lia. What does this thing do, exact—?”

“Terrible news!” My question was interrupted by Aqua (*my* item and my terrible mistake). Darkness and Megumin were with her, and all three of them were out of breath. It looked like they’d run all the way here.

“Hey, guys, what’s the rush?” I asked.

“It’s him! Daniel is attacking the capital!” Aqua cried.

“What?!” I’d been lulled into a false sense of security because we hadn’t heard a peep from him.

“I-if he goes on a rampage, the contest might be canceled, just like our tour!” Cielo said.

“Not on my watch! It’s up to us dancers to defend our contest! Lia, Cielo, let’s go!” said Erika.

“Right... I’m going to bring this, just in case.” Lia attached a rope to her keyboard and slung it across her torso like a shoulder keyboard.

“We’re going, too, right, Kazuma?” Aqua said.

“Sure thing. Hey... Tell me about this keyboard you gave Lia. What kind of item is it? What powers does it have?”

“Huh? You think I’d remember details like *that*?!”

Grr... I couldn’t believe she could say that without a hint of embarrassment. First the “ancient weapon,” now this—it was dereliction of divine duty!

“Anyway, let’s just hurry! Otherwise, who knows what will become of the contest?!” Aqua said.

9

“Mwah-ha-ha-ha-ha! In order to convince the Demon King’s army to take me back in! And in order to ensure a pleasant married life in the future! I’m going to need those humans to suffer a little!”

“That’s fantastic, Lord Daniel! I’m so glad to see you hard at work again. As your closest confidant, it makes me very happy!”

I was watching Daniel and Charlie from the shadows, and I couldn’t help thinking... They needed to dream bigger! And anyway, when had Daniel started to think about getting married?

“So the only reason he didn’t do anything recently is because he didn’t *feel* like it?” I said.

“I’m impressed he was able to get himself back into gear, though,” said Aqua. “Unlike you, Kazuma. You only do any work if your back’s to the wall.”

“That is true,” concurred Megumin.

“Yeah, she’s right,” said Darkness.

Ugh, stop it! Don’t give me those judgmental looks...

Bigger problem: Daniel and Charlie were holding their rampage right by the stage! The nerve!

“Tremble before the might of this ancient weapon! Now howl forth, thunder! Thor’s—”

No more time to stand and watch! We burst from the wings.

“It’s the moment you’ve all been waiting for! The stars are here!” I announced.

“Hrm! You again,” Daniel said, less than enthused. It wasn’t like I was so thrilled to see him, either.

“I will protect this city and its dancers! If you must unleash your lightning bolts... U-unleash them on me!” said Darkness.

“I am here! Let us now see once and for all which is more

powerful, Thor's Hammer or Explosion!" added Megumin. Neither of them seemed intimidated, let alone terrified, by Daniel's weapon.

"What a lot of noise for such tiny insects. Stop screeching at me and make with the girls!" So he was after the Axel Hearts again. I should have known.

"Looking for us? We're right here!" shouted Lia as she and her friends bounded onto the scene.

Daniel and Charlie were immediately head over heels.

"Oh-ho, Lia! You *are* alive! For us to be reunited here and now... What can it be if not destiny?! You've seen my overwhelming strength—surely you've fallen in love with me afresh!"

"Afresh? Lia was never in love with you to begin with! You need to give up on these gross fantasies!" Erika said.

"This stage is where the dreams of lots of dancers are going to come true! People like you don't deserve to be on it!" Cielo said. The two of them stepped forward to cover Lia.

"Let me be honest: I don't *enjoy* smashing up dancers' stages. But such are the travails of love! Today, I take another step toward my long-dreamed-of marriage to Lia!"

He really was the hideous final form of the idol-obsessed geek!

"Marriage? *What* is he talking about?"

"Don't listen to him, Lia," I said. "Here he comes!"

I tried to be ready—but we were facing two extremely potent enemies in Daniel and Charlie, teamed up with a "cheat" weapon in Thor's Hammer, which was no longer threatening to backfire and fry them. It was shaping up to be a pretty brutal fight... Or so I thought.

"Hrrgh... I never expected this...! Did I subconsciously hold back in order not to destroy my girls' sacred stage?"

I wanted to call him out for being a sore loser—but I thought it was probably true. He'd been moving slowly, and he hadn't used the power of Thor's Hammer.

"Hee-hee! Excuses? That's pathetic."

"Aqua! Don't antagonize him!"

That was all it took, though. Furious, Daniel raised the hammer above his head. "I'll show you excuses! Thor's Hammer! I call on your true power! Rain lightning upon the capital city!"

The weapon began to glow; we could hear the crackle of electricity.

"Y-you'd pull the whole surrounding area into this? Don't you dare!" I said, but Daniel wasn't interested. He swung the hammer, and lightning bolts cascaded down all over the city.

"Noooo! My...my house!"

"Where'd this lightning storm come from?! It's causing fires!"

I could hear citizens shouting with grief and rage. What were we supposed to do about an indiscriminate AOE attack?!

“Hrk! Even I can’t defend against such a wide-ranging lightning strike!” Darkness said.

“I can’t hold it in any longer! My explosion shall punish him!”

“Stop, Megumin! You’ll only make the damage way worse!” Not to mention we would probably be blamed for it.

“Then what do we do, Kazuma?!” Aqua asked.

“First we have to evacuate outside the range of the lightning!” I said. We would have to get the citizens somewhere safe.

“Don’t make me laugh! You really intend to protect *all* these people? The absurdity!”

“Hit ’em again, Lord Daniel!”

“And so I shall! Rain down, O lightning!”

“Daniel! Don’t drag innocent bystanders into this!” Darkness swung her greatsword at him in an attempt to give him something to think about, but as usual, she didn’t so much as graze him.

You’re not even buying us time!

“I’ll do what I please! And I’ll continue to devastate this town until the Demon King sees what I’m capable of, and Lia accepts my marriage proposal!”

Man, there’s egotism and then there’s egotism! What was he, a kid having a temper tantrum?

“Grr... I’ve got to save everyone!” Lia said.

“No, don’t go, Lia!” I shouted, but she rushed straight at Daniel.

“It’s no good—I’ll never be in time at this distance!” Darkness choked out.

“Prepare yourselves for the end. *Rain down, O lightning!!*”

“Magic keyboard! Please, keep everyone safe...!”

I squeezed my eyes shut, but the lightning never hit.

Ever so slowly, I opened my eyes again and discovered myself protected by a blue light. “Hey... What’s this?”

“It’s a really powerful barrier. This is amazing... Did Lia do this?” Erika said.

“She’s been playing that thing like a normal keyboard all along—who knew it had this sort of power?” added Cielo. I guess even Lia’s party members hadn’t known about it. Of course not—she’d only just remembered what that keyboard was really capable of.

I touched the barrier experimentally. It was smooth, like skin, but weirdly hard.

“How could something like that repel the lightning of Thor’s Hammer?!” Daniel exclaimed.

“I said I would protect them. You’re not going to hurt anyone else!”

“This is incredible! The notes have turned into a barrier and blocked the hammer’s lightning! Kazuma... Kazuma! Do you think this would allow me to set off my explosion anywhere I liked?!” Megumin sounded like a kid who’d made some wild discovery. Lia, though—getting your memories back and then being a straight-up hero? It was like she was the star of some kind of story.

“Right, right. I’d say that’s about what I expected from that keyboard,” Aqua said. She’d either remembered what the item was capable of, or she was pretending to have remembered. I wished she would just shut up.

“To think,” Darkness said, “that keyboard had a power like this... Wait, what’s that?!”

“Yaaaaah!” Lia shouted, and the barrier sent the lightning bolts flying back into the sky.

“Hrrrraggh!” Daniel burst out.

“I... I don’t believe this! Thor’s Hammer isn’t even working on that barrier!” Charlie said.

“Charlie, it’s time for a strategic retreat! We’ll rethink things and come back!”

So they were going to be the first to blink in this stalemate.

“Hold it right there! You think you can just run away *again*?!”

“Aqua, let them go!” Darkness said.

“Even with Lia blocking the lightning, it’d still be dangerous to have Daniel targeting bystanders and civilians. It’s actually a win for us if they decide to get out of here,” I said. And I meant it, but I was mostly worried about the stage being destroyed if we had our battle right there. It wouldn’t matter if we beat Daniel if that stage ended up in splinters.

“The wise keep their distance from unknown quantities. But this doesn’t mean you’ve won! I’ll be back. I’ll make Lia mine, no matter how many tries it takes!”

“Lord Daniel... I feel like I hear you talk more and more about your marriage to Lia. This is all to get back to the Demon King’s army, isn’t it?”

“Y-yes, of course! It’s all to show His Majesty just how powerful I am! Come to me, wyvern!”

He had obviously forgotten all about the Demon King and his army.

Daniel and Charlie hopped on the back of the wyvern and beat an escape.

“It’s over... We made it, somehow. W-we have to see to repairing the contest hall...and evacuating the citizens...,” Lia said, but then she pitched forward like a puppet with its strings cut.

“Lia?!” I rushed over to her, but she didn’t have any visible

injuries. She was just unconscious.

“She probably used up her magic. My list had a few items like that on it,” said Aqua. She ought to know; she was the one who’d given it to her.

We took Lia to a tent that had served as a waiting room. While Erika and Cielo kept an eye on her, the rest of us cleaned up the mess. If we didn’t get this place back in shape, that would be the end of the contest—and my chances of debt freedom!

Chapter Seven

1

“Okay! If you’re injured, please line up over here! I’ll cast Heal on each of you!”

There were enough injuries that a whole line of people was waiting to receive Aqua’s healing magic. Daniel had really done a number on this city with his little outburst.

“This is terrible. The stage is in shambles,” Darkness said.

“For someone who claims to be a fan of these dancers, Daniel isn’t very careful around them, is he?” added Megumin.

“Yeah. We’re just lucky there weren’t any victims among the civilians,” I said. The vast majority of the casualties were soldiers, a silver lining of sorts.

“Come on, Kazuma! Do you plan to make me fix this entire town and help all the injured people all by myself?” Aqua said.

“You never do *anything* to help out. Now of all times, you could at least do a little work.”

“Kazuma! That’s a terrible thing to say! You said what should never be said!” Aqua shouted, tears in her eyes.

It didn’t bother me much. “Yeah, sure, I hear you. Look, I know it’s tough—so I called in some help.”

“That’s very nice of you, but I don’t seem to see them anywhere,” Megumin said, looking around. I admit, there didn’t seem to be anyone, like, right *there*.

“Hrm,” I grumbled. “Where *is* she?”

Oh! There she was. Over in a corner of a plaza a short distance away. I trotted over to where she was busy treating an injured soldier.

“Thanks, Miss. It’s a big help to have someone around who can use Heal,” the soldier said.

“Oh, please, think nothing of it. All part of a priest’s duty!” She gave him the kindest of smiles. It was such a beautiful sight, the soldier seemed ready to fall in love. And you know what? If this had been all there was to her, Cecily would have been a model cleric.

“Heeey! I need a heal over here!” someone shouted.

“Just a second, please! I’ll be right there!”

“Huh? That outfit... You’re not one of the sisters of the Axis

Church, are you? Like, the completely crazy ones?!" I guess the soldier recognized Cecily's blue habit as a sign of her Axis faith. He scowled openly.

"Why, yes, I am. 'The crazy ones,' though? That makes me a little sad."

"Y-yeah, sorry. I didn't mean anything by it."

"I understand. A few overenthusiastic believers give us all a bad name. I wish you wouldn't think that *all* Axis faithful are like that, though." She gave him a beseeching look.

The soldier scratched his head, embarrassed by his own behavior. "Sure, I get it. Like you—you're proof that some Axis sisters are the real thing. I guess I had you people all wrong."

"Please don't let it bother you. Listen, you must be hungry, yes? Let me offer you this Arcan bun." Cecily wiped her eyes and, smiling with a graciousness worthy of the Virgin Mary, held out a stuffed bun.

"Thanks! Don't mind if I do..."

"There! You ate it! I saw you! You can't take it back now!" The moment the guy swallowed, Cecily completely changed her tune. "Now that you've eaten that food, not to mention gotten all those healing spells I cast on you, you have to sign this confession of faith!"

"W-wait... Didn't you do all that out of the goodness of your heart?"

"What self-respecting cleric would drag her ass all the way to the capital and start helping people just out of the goodness of her heart?! I'm not here for mercy, I'm here for evangelism! I want everyone to know Lady Aqua's will!"

Confronted with Cecily's true nature, the soldier made a desperate bid to get away, but she zipped around him and cut off his escape. "After all I've done for you, you can't possibly say *no*, can you?! Come on! Here's the paper! Sign it!"

"H-heek... I knew you Axis disciples were bad news!"

"Act now and receive free bar soap and liquid detergent! Come on, let's go!" She was merciless. The soldier was genuinely terrified.

"Stop that, you're scaring him," I said, delivering a karate chop to her skull.

"Ow! Kazuma, please don't just walk up and hit me like that. What if my brain goes funny?"

"Oh, believe me, you're past having to worry about that. Anyway, it's hardball conversion strategies like this that give your faith such a bad rap. C'mon, get back to healing hurt folks. Your beloved Lady Aqua will be real happy."

"Lady Aqua?! If that's what *she* wants...well, I guess there's no fighting it! But I'll expect plenty of gelatinous slime for my trouble, okay?"

I knew Aqua's name would grease the wheels. Cecily got right to work. Looked like things were all set here, then—next I would go check out the team of strong-as-hell types who were helping to remove the rubble. Darkness and Cielo were putting the guys to shame and working up a healthy sweat.

"There's my macho girls!" I said.

"“I said, don't call me macho!”" they snapped in unison.

"Hey, you're doing great work. It's actually impressive, the way you get along."

"I guess it helps that we're both nobles," Darkness said.

"Yeah," Cielo agreed. Oh yeah—according to Cielo, her family was a pretty powerful noble household.

The question of what to do from here hung over me. Ideally, I wanted to take care of Daniel so I could be completely focused on the contest, but it was complicated. The capital city had put a bounty on Daniel's head of five hundred million eris. But with all the explosions, rampages, and general mayhem, my debts amounted to eight hundred million. Even if I did somehow manage to take down Daniel, I would still come up three hundred million short. I could risk my life in battle against an enemy as powerful as any general of the Demon King and *still* be in debt. Which left just one option...

"My mind's made up! We just try to keep Daniel out of this! Okay, everyone, focus—we have a contest to win!"

"Th-that's very gratifying to hear, but..."

"Yeah? What is it, Cielo? You seem really down." She kept glancing at me like she wanted to say something, then looked away again. It couldn't be... Was she in *love* with me? A producer... His pop idol... A forbidden love! Yeah, I could go for that.

"Kazuma, I think you're misunderstanding something. While you were away, Lia told us that she's...leaving the Axel Hearts!"

"Oh, huh. Well, this industry does reward talent. Can't blame her for taking her act solo," I said. Idols "retired" from their groups all... the...time?! "Wait, *what*?! Details, now! Where's Lia?!"

"At our house, I think..." Cielo was so upset that her shoulders were shaking, but I remembered her fear of men just in time to stop myself from giving her a comforting pat.

Without Lia... What would happen to the Axel Hearts? What about the contest? What about my debts?! I would have to get the story from Lia before I could figure out what to do, so I rushed to where the Axel Hearts were staying.

convince Lia to come back? I'd rushed to the door of her room, where I now stood, but this was where the real problems started.

"Come on, Kazuma, say something to her!" Erika gave me a push, and the distance between me and the door decreased.

How to start, how to start? "Hey, Lia... I heard you said you were quitting the Axel Hearts. Is that true?" I asked, but there was no answer.

"Don't worry! Kazuma's not mad at you, Lia. He's just very worried!" Cielo said sweetly. At that, the door opened, and we could see Lia. (We could also see—and *smell*—the room behind her. But let's not talk about that, shall we?)

"I'm sorry for not talking to you about it," Lia said. "But there's no way I can defeat Daniel while also being a dancer. And I have to defeat anyone who threatens this world."

Wow, she was really serious about this. I guess getting her memories back had given a jolt to her sense of duty as a "transplant." Hey, maybe she'd even take out the Demon King for us! Then my job would be done, and Aqua would be thrilled. I couldn't stand the thought of Lia abandoning the Axel Hearts at this stage, though. Not with the prize pot so nearly within my grasp...!

"I hear you. Daniel's definitely a threat. But! Doesn't that mean people need the Axel Hearts now more than ever—to put a smile on their faces?!"

"Kazuma..."

"The bounty on Daniel is five hundred million eris, but that contest pays a billion! Just look at the numbers—the world values a dancing contest higher than stopping Daniel!"

Uh-oh. My real motives were threatening to make an appearance in my attempt at persuasion.

"About that, Kazuma," said Lia, "considering the power of Thor's Hammer, the bounty on Daniel was pushed up to one point five billion."

"O-one point five...*billion*?!"

Everything I'd been thinking of saying to get Lia back in the contest deserted me.

"Anyway, the numbers don't matter. And Daniel came after me personally! That's why... That's why I have to do my duty!" said Lia.

"Right, of course. Don't say another word, Lia. Much as it pains me as your producer, I have to respect your choices." I gave her a hearty slap on the shoulder and my most blinding smile.

Nobody seemed to expect that—Lia, Cielo, and Erika all took a step back. Shocked body language all around.

"Wh-whaaaaat?!" Cielo gasped.

"I thought you were here to get Lia back, Kazuma!" said Erika.

The contest offered a billion eris—but if I worked with Lia to beat Daniel, it'd be a cool 1.5 billion. It was obvious which one I would choose!

“All right, Lia, I'm one hundred percent in your corner on taking down Daniel. I'll tell every adventurer I know to get in on this!”

3

I called a hurried meeting at the Adventurers Guild.

“What's this about, Kazuma Sato? Why the urgent summons?” asked Mitsurugi, who stood with his arms crossed, giving me a dour look. He was my number one source of combat strength, so I would have to put up with the high-and-mighty attitude.

“This is Kazuma we're talking about. I'm sure he's cooking up some no-good scheme,” said Chris. I didn't usually see a lot of her—she always seemed to be busy with other things—but when I told her to at least come hear what I had to say, she was willing.

“D-do you think it's really okay for me to be a part of this? I'm not a third wheel, am I?”

“You could stand to have just a little more confidence in yourself, Yunyun.”

Ah, that would be the Crimson Magic pair of Yunyun and Arue. I'd had Megumin send them a message, and now I was sure it had been the right choice.

“It must be the goddess's plan that finds us all here together today! Gather round, everyone, and sign this paper as a mark of our friendship...”

“Sorry, Cecily, but save the proselytizing for later,” I said. I still didn't think it was a mistake to have called her in—she might have her, uh, quirks, but she was also legitimately capable. There were a number of other adventurers there, too, all people I had asked to come and hear what I was proposing.

“Thanks for coming, everyone. I have a favor to ask of you,” I said.

“A favor? Those don't come cheap from me!” Dust shouted.

“You can get on your high horse *after* you pay off your debts and repay the favors *you* owe!” Rin said, jabbing him with her elbow.

Dust's mouth and personality and, uh, everything he did on a daily basis was pretty bad, sure, but even so, he was still one of the top adventurers in Axel. With Rin to keep a leash on him, he might even come in helpful.

“It's not like there's nothing in this for you,” I said to the assembled crowd. “You get a chance to leave your names to legend in a holy battle against a foe who wields an ancient weapon!”

“Holy battle? That’s got a nice ring to it. I might have to include that in my next novel,” Arue said. I wasn’t surprised—this sort of situation was right up a Crimson Magicker’s alley. Megumin, standing behind her, was raring to go, too. Yunyun was acting uninterested, but there was a slight flush in her cheeks. I guess blood was thicker than... trying not to care.

“Um, is this about Mr. Daniel? I heard Thor’s Hammer had been brought back or something...” Wiz, the former general of the Demon King, was here at my request, in part because I thought she might be able to give us useful information. I invited Vanir, too, but he said he was busy trying to sell off the junk Wiz had bought for the store.

“I thought in our last fight, it turned out that the user took lightning damage, too. Did he get that thing he needed?” asked Chris.

Megumin nodded. “Yes, after that, he obtained the Járngreipr gloves and is now able to control Thor’s Hammer. To be honest, I’m somewhat jealous.”

“I was with them at the time—a Sword Master!—and even I couldn’t overpower him. I can only apologize, my goddess.” Mitsurugi bowed his head reverently toward Aqua.

“Oh... You were there?”

“Sure he was! Did you forget? Wow, I feel bad for that guy,” I said.

“Goddess, pleaaase!” Mitsurugi was devastated, but at least he went quiet after that. I could just leave him alone.

“The point is, Daniel and Thor’s Hammer are a dangerous combination! In fact... We might be facing a threat to this very world! The favor I want to ask you is none other than this: that you, as adventurers, not stand by and watch this happen. You can’t, can you?”

The room full of do-gooders listened to me closely. But I wasn’t getting through to everybody.

“No way! Nothing doing!” Dust exclaimed.

“Dust, hear me out,” I said. “What if he attacks Axel? What about our place of *rest* and *relaxation*? Our succubus shop?”

“Let’s do this, Kazuma! This is a time when all of us need to band together!”

“That was fast. What in the world did he say to you?” asked Rin, taken aback by her companion’s abrupt change of heart. She gave him a probing look.

Dust went down easy. As for the next person who didn’t look quite convinced...

“Hey, Cecily. You get in on this, the Axis Church looks good, and you might just get some more followers, you hear what I’m saying?” I asked with a significant look at Aqua. She noticed me looking at her, and for a second, she just seemed puzzled, but when I glared at her,

the message got through. She grabbed Cecily's hand.

"I might have the smallest, *tiniest* bit of responsibility for what's going on, so it would mean a lot to me if you helped out," she said.

"Lady Aqua... He's an awful lot of trouble, but I'll help him!"

Good. With Aqua along, I should be able to keep even this unruly priest on task. Now all that was left were the two Crimson Magic Clan members.

"Arue—Megumin might have told you, but this ancient weapon is *frighteningly* cool. Don't you want to see it with your own eyes?"

"Hmm... I certainly wouldn't mind. Maybe I could use it in my writing! All right, I'm with you."

"Hey, Yunyun. Uh..."

"I-I'm going! As Megumin's rival, I have to!"

Well, that was easy. Nice.

"I'm going to need all the help I can get. I'm counting on all of you! And of course, there'll be a reward!" I said. "Daniel's headed toward Axel, attacking nearby villages on the way. We're going to stop him right here!"

""""""Yeah!""""""

Aqua, Megumin, Darkness, Dust, Rin, Mitsurugi, Cecily, Chris, Yunyun, Arue, Rin, and me. This was a pretty powerful party I'd assembled. But would it be enough?

4

We got fresh news about Daniel just as we were holding our strategy meeting.

"I've been told Daniel attacked the next village over. The villagers were able to evacuate, just barely, but he smashed every building in town," Darkness said, pointing to the location on the map lying on the table.

"Curse you, Daniel! Robbing the innocent of their houses! I'm going to go hunt him down right this minute!" Mitsurugi said.

"Slow down. I'm as upset as you are, but we need to keep a cool head," I said. We were dealing with a very powerful enemy. We weren't going to win this without a plan.

"In the capital, Daniel attacked indiscriminately. But this village—the fact that nobody died makes it sound like he's not out to hurt people, at least not yet. So what is he after?" Lia said.

That brought something back to me—Daniel had been talking about that very thing during one of our battles. "That's it! He wants to destroy towns and cities to show off his power!"

"Just to show off? What a jerk," Aqua said.

"Everybody, look at this map. You can see the route Daniel's

taking—and Axel's the next stop," I said. This would be the obvious place to try to hold him.

"Say, where are Miss Erika and Miss Cielo? I'm surprised to see you here without them, Miss Lia," Yunyun said. I hadn't even noticed until she said it—but where *were* the other two?

Lia bit her lip and looked at the ground. "They're still in the capital—practicing for the contest."

"Shouldn't we have asked them to help? We need every bit of firepower we can get right now..."

"No, Megumin, we mustn't!" Lia said. "Cielo and Erika have their own dreams as dancers, and I won't put that at risk by asking them to be part of such a dangerous undertaking!"

"And what about you, Lia? After you worked so hard to be in that contest," said Darkness.

"I can't just dance my life away while the world's in danger. I told Cielo and Erika to find a replacement for me. I want them to go win that contest... That's *my* dream."

It was hard to believe her, though; the disappointment was written all over her face.

"So you're sure about this?" I said.

"I am. If we don't stop Daniel, the contest might not even happen. In order to fulfill my mission, I have to fight!"

If she was that set on doing this, there wasn't much more I could say. Like Megumin said, we did need every fighter who would help us—and anyway, I did want to respect Lia's decision.

"Looks like your mind is made up. If we really have to go to the mat with Daniel, I guarantee we're gonna need that magic keyboard of yours. Glad to have you along," I said. That barrier could mean the difference between victory and defeat.

5

We formed up outside Axel and waited. I knew we were facing a really powerful enemy, but with this many people, we had to have a chance of winning...right?

"Almost time. Everybody ready?" I said.

"But of course. I am simply itching to make him eat one of my explosions!" said Megumin, who had foregone her "daily explosion" for the sake of this battle. I knew it was driving her up the wall—and I hoped she would take it out on Daniel.

"I'll protect everyone here, whatever it takes. That's my very purpose in life!" Mitsurugi was so fired up you probably could have fried an egg on him. Take his usual personality and add Aqua being there, and he was almost *too* ready to go.

Lia looked at him and mumbled, “Purpose, huh...” She didn’t sound very happy with herself. Guess she was still having trouble letting go of her doubts.

The tension was getting unbearable—until a couple of loud, cheerful voices blew it away like a friendly breeze.

“You! Can! Do! It!”

“We’re here for you, Lia!”

“Cielo? Erika? What are you doing here? What about the contest?!” Lia exclaimed, rushing over to them like she couldn’t believe what she was seeing.

“The contest is exactly why we’re here!” Erika said.

“We just can’t do it without you, Lia. Won’t you come back to the Axel Hearts? Pretty please?”

They took Lia’s hands, and just for a second she smiled, really happy. But then her face fell again, and she shook her head. “I became a dancer to help me get my memories back. Now that I remember everything, what’s the point of going onstage?”

She sure looked sad about it for someone who claimed there was no point.

“I don’t care about any point! Besides, who quits in the middle of a contest? I mean, how self-centered can you get?” Erika said.

“What was self-centered was dragging you both into this. I’m really sorry, but what’s most important for me right now is stopping Daniel. I have the power to resist Thor’s Hammer. How can I just go up there and dance instead of using it to help people?”

“Lia... You told us you love singing and dancing. Was that a lie?” Cielo asked.

“No, but...my duty is more important. And I want the two of you to absolutely stay out of this fight.”

“Lia...”

Things were getting heavy around here, and it wasn’t just because of our impending battle. It didn’t really seem like my place to say anything to the girls, but if I didn’t do something, they’d drag down morale right when we were trying to get ready to fight.

Just then, though, a guild employee’s voice blared from a speaker: *“Emergency alert! Emergency alert! Daniel and Charlie have appeared northeast of town! Daniel is armed with the ancient weapon Thor’s Hammer and should be considered extremely dangerous! All adventurers, please assemble at the town gate!”*

All of us drew our weapons.

“Kazuma! Daniel’s coming, just like you thought!” Chris was staring fixedly into the sky—where we could see two wyverns, on which rode Daniel and Charlie.

“Grrraaah!” the wyverns roared as they touched down. Daniel and

Charlie dismounted.

“Well, looks like the gang’s all here. How nice of you to show up so Lord Daniel can crisp you all together!”

“Hrm... Oh! Lia! I so wanted to see you! And I can only apologize for making you wait. Your future husband has arrived!”

Daniel got grosser by the minute.

“Yeah, I’ve been waiting, too—for the day I destroy you!” I thought Lia sounded just a little overenthusiastic, but maybe that was what happened when you had just turned your back on two of your party members and put yourself in kind of a corner.

“Daniel, I wish you wouldn’t resort to such desperate measures. Surely we can talk things o—”

“Pipe down, Wiz, you traitor to the Demon King’s army. Now I shall show you that it matters not how many party members you have—you are powerless before Thor’s Hammer!” The weapon crackled with lightning as he swung it proudly above his head.

“Hoh! So that’s Thor’s Hammer! You were quite right—it’s as cool as one could ask for!” said Arue.

“Right?! It pulls on—indeed tears at—the heartstrings of Crimson Magickers such as ourselves! Quickly, now—let us steal it from him and shower it with the affection it deserves!” Megumin said. The two of them were obviously overjoyed at the sight of the hammer.

“Surely this isn’t the time! We need to stay focused!” chided Yunyun, the only member of the entire Crimson Magic Clan in her right mind.

“Do you think you mice have the slightest chance against my lord now that he has the ancient weapon? I laugh! Bwah-ha-ha!” Charlie sounded even higher and mightier than his so-called lord.

“Don’t waste your breath, Charlie,” Daniel said. “The only way they’ll understand is when they *feel* it for themselves!” Then they both began the transformation from their human forms into trolls.

“Going all out first thing, are they? I couldn’t ask for a better fight. Now! Make me taste the full wrath of your lightning!” cried Darkness, who seemed less intimidated than...ecstatic.

“K-Kazuma... Are you sure you don’t want me to block this with my keyboard?” Lia said.

“Yeah. You can just ignore him. Wait for my signal!”

“Are you ready? Then try yourself against the power of my lightning!” Daniel exclaimed. He was targeting Darkness, but even a stray bolt from that hammer would be enough to destroy any of the rest of us.

“Now!” I shouted. “Go for it, Lia!”

“Magic keyboard! Lend me strength!”

The battle ebbed and flowed, with our party giving as good as we got.

...Well, okay. The truth is: We were kind of up against a wall. We could try to mount an offense, but we didn't dare go outside the barrier that was protecting us from Daniel's attacks. And we were so busy keeping ourselves safe that there was hardly a moment to think about striking back anyway.

"Huff... Huff... You do know how to put up a fight. But this is the end. I summon my lightning!"

"Grr... Blast it...!" Lia growled. The barrier absorbed Daniel's biggest lightning blast the same way it had all the others, but things were looking grim.

"It's no good! She managed to hold it, but he's going to overwhelm us!" Megumin cried.

"How much lightning can that thing put out?! Even for a cheat item, it's OP!" I said.

Worse, Lia was fading fast. She was on her knees, breathing hard. She'd almost reached her limit. At this rate...

Then two figures rushed over to her.

"Lia!"

"Lia!"

"Cielo! Erika! Why are you here? I told you to stay out of this!"

"Well, we didn't tell you to leave the group, but you went and did it, didn't you? We decided that meant we could make *our* own choices, too!" Cielo said.

"I know maybe we can only slow you down, but we can't stand by twiddling our thumbs while you fight!" Erika added.

"Cielo... Erika...!"

Touching moments of friendship were great and all, but we were in the middle of a battle here. It wasn't social hour. If Daniel got a shot in at them, he'd wipe them all out in one go.

Speaking of Daniel, he said, "What a beautiful sight. What an honor to witness my *oshi* like this..."

"Yes! It's the most wonderful thing! So moving!"

Daniel and Charlie were both wiping their eyes with their handkerchiefs. Fan psychology at work, huh!

"No matter how hard things get, we'll always be together! We'll never leave your side again, Lia!" Cielo said.

"When we work together, there's nothing we can't do!" Erika added. The two of them started to sing, and almost as if in response, Lia's magic keyboard began to glow.

"The keyboard... It's getting more powerful?" Lia said.

"Sing with us, Lia!"

“Yeah! It takes all three of us to be the Axel Hearts!”

There was only a short pause before Lia exclaimed, “Right!”

She joined in the chorus, and the barrier glowed brighter than ever. I didn’t really see the point of breaking into song in the middle of a battle, and I didn’t understand why the flagging barrier had suddenly gotten so much brighter. But whatever, right? It all looked good to me!

“Wow! The girls’ friendship caused a reaction in the barrier that made it even stronger! I guess! Something like that!”

Brilliant phlebotinum, Aqua!

“What?! It’s back to its original strength! No—it’s even stronger!” Daniel said.

“Thanks for the update! It’s just the opening we needed—light ’em up, everyone!” I shouted.

Rin, Arue, and Yunyun all opened up with their magic. Daniel, caught completely off guard, stumbled backward. “Grraaaahhh! Mere grunts? How dare you!”

We were doing damage, that much was clear. Actually, this was about ideal, but trolls prided themselves on their durability, so we had to lay it on thick if we wanted to take them down.

“Lia! Erika! Cielo! Listen to this!” I zipped over to them and told them the plan I’d just thought of. “Think you can do it?”

“Yes, probably, but... Are you sure? If we get the timing even a little bit wrong...”

Lia’s head drooped; she wasn’t looking very confident. I put a hand on her shoulder. “Don’t worry—I’ll take responsibility for whatever happens. If a producer’s idol hands him lemons, he makes lemonade—that’s his job! You’ll never get a bigger or better stage. Show me the best performance you can put on!”

““““Yes sir, Mr. Producer!””””

So they were on board. Great. It was an accident of circumstances that I’d become their producer, but for the first time I felt like we were really all in this together.

“Let me help, too,” Mitsurugi said. “I’ll give them a taste of the enchanted sword Gram!”

“Well, I’m not gonna be left out! If I don’t do some work, I won’t get any reward!”

Dust and Mitsurugi added themselves to our front row and piled on the damage.

“Grrrraaahhhh!”

“All right, it’s working! With Daniel this weakened, the level difference won’t matter! It’s time for you-know-what! Chris—let’s do what we do best! Aqua, Cecily, buff our Luck!” I said.

“I’m sure I don’t know what you’re planning, but all right!

Blessing!" Aqua called.

"I'll handle the adorable girl, Lady Aqua! *Blessing!*"

Chris and I weren't exactly cut out for the battlefield class-wise—but this was where we could make a difference.

"Never expected my skills to come in so handy at a moment like this! All I ever got from showing you this ability was a reputation as the monster who taught Kazuma to steal panties... Glad I can finally set that right!"

Together we cried, "'*Steaaaaal!*'"

"Ha-ha-ha! *That's* what you use at this moment? I hate to break it to you, but you failed to steal Thor's Hammer!" Daniel gave the hammer a quick, not to say panicked, pat to make sure it *was* still there, then let out a breath and grinned as if he was in complete control of the situation.

"Hah... Look what I got," Chris said.

"Ah! That's my glossy Lia publicity shot! I got the last one! The last one..." It looked like Chris had succeeded in dealing psychological damage to Daniel, but we needed better.

"L-Lord Daniel! That photo isn't the only thing they stole—look!" said Charlie.

"What are you blathering about? They were obviously after Thor's Hammer, and I've still got that. Now, it's time to finish this once and for—"

"No, Lord Daniel! Look at your hands!"

Charlie had seen the problem—but Daniel wasn't interested.

"Howl forth, my lightning!" The bolts came flying from Thor's Hammer and landed...not on us, but right back on Daniel's head. "Hggghhaaaaaaaaah!" he screamed.

"You're right, Daniel, I didn't steal Thor's Hammer—but I got *these*! Sucks to be you!" I said, holding up a pair of black gloves. This was what I'd been after all along!

"Járngreipr? So that's why the electricity hit me... Give them back!"

"Yeah, as if! Megumin, Wiz, hit it!"

This was the moment I'd been saving the explosions for. And these blasts came from the same women who'd brought Mobile Fortress Destroyer to its knees!

"How I have longed for this moment! Here I go!"

""*Exploooooosion!!*""

Just as the two glowing balls of explosive magical energy were about to land on Daniel, I yelled, "*Noooooowwww!*"

A glowing blue barrier sprang up—right around Daniel and Charlie. The explosions went off inside it, bouncing back and forth off the barrier without ever escaping it, multiplying the spells' power

until there was nothing but a massive crater left in the ground.

“Ha-ha-ha! All this was possible thanks to *my* astonishing power! Make sure you show your gratitude, peons!” Dust said.

“You hardly did anything!” Rin snapped back. Ah, things were back to normal.

I ignored them.

“Point is, it’s over,” I mumbled. Now we just had one more little matter to take care of. I stole a glance at the Axel Hearts to find them sharing a serious look.

“Lia... Do you know how sad it made us when you said you were leaving?” Cielo asked. “And how worried we were? Because we knew you were going off to fight alone, without us...”

“Cielo...,” Lia said.

“It takes all three of us to make the Axel Hearts. Whether we’re dancing or adventuring, we’re not complete without you!”



“Erika...! But I’ve put both of you through so much... I don’t have any right to call myself a dancer anymore.”

Gosh, this was really serious. I guess it’s not the sort of thing you put behind you with a “Hey, sorry.”

“You do not need a reason to devote yourself to something. Indeed, the Way of Explosions and the Way of the Dancing Girl are exactly the same!”

Yeah, I don’t think they are.

“Just do what you want—and do it to the maximum! You *want* to keep dancing, right, Lia?”

“I do... Cielo, Erika... I’m so sorry for worrying you. Do you think we could be a dancing group again?”

“Of course! But no more quitting!” said Cielo.

“The Axel Hearts are reborn! We’re here to seize victory *and* protect our town!” said Erika. The three of them clasped hands. I guess things had worked out.

This was great! I would be able to wipe out my debts with the bounty on Daniel, but things were going so well, we might as well try to bag the grand prize at that contest, too! What could possibly go wrong?

Epilogue

The Axel Hearts threw themselves into the contest, and between their awesome performance and the whole thing about them saving our city, they won it. With that, I had the bounty and the prize money both in hand. I should have been able to pay off my debts, give everyone a handsome reward, and still have money burning a hole in my pocket. *Should* have...

I was at the tavern in the guild drinking some bubbly when Aqua sat down beside me. "It's so great that the show turned out to be a huge success, huh? Miss! Some chicken nuggets and bubbly, please!"

"Yes, that was amazing," agreed Megumin, who was sitting across from us. "A person could fall in love with the energy in their performance!"

"I guess that's what experience does for you. They were like completely different people from the girls we first met," said Darkness. She was next to Megumin. So our usual gang was all here.

"Indeed, indeed."

"Why the long face, Kazuma? Everything turned out great, right? Our debts are gone, and the show is safely over. Crack a smile, why don't you?" said Aqua.

She was right, everything had gone great—right up until the end of the performance. Until that moment, there had been no problems.

"Yeah," I said. "Yeah, it'd be fantastic. If *someone* overwhelmed with emotion hadn't shouted out, 'I'm going to donate the bounty and all my profits from this show!' right at the end!"

In the corner of my vision, a dark-haired head jolted. "Th-the excitement just ran away with me... And with all the damage to the city, I... I just..."

I continued to ignore her. "And if somebody *else* hadn't added, 'Just count on cute li'l *us*!'"

"Aw... It just, y'know, it felt really good to have everyone's eyes on us..." This time a pair of pink pigtails located beside the dark head shook side to side.

"I thought at least *one* of them had a decent head on her shoulders, but she just stood there smiling and didn't even stop them!"

"Well, er, after all, as a noble, helping people survive is..." Golden hair, the mark of nobility, hid itself behind the black and pink hair.

I wanted to be able to see more than their heads, so I went around the tavern table. Kneeling contritely in front of it were the Axel Hearts.

That's right: At the very end of the show, they'd burst out with the most outrageous things, without even asking my permission! With that many witnesses, there was no way of backpedaling, so after paying my debts, the massive mountain of money left over was...all donated.

"Argh! I should be *swimming* in cash right now, living a life of ease and dissolution!" All three of them shrank down even further at my agonized complaint. "Just look at this miserable excuse for a celebration. I was gonna rent out a high-class restaurant and paint the town red, and instead I end up in this dump!" I let out a snort of laughter and gave an exaggerated shrug. When I let my head droop theatrically, though, my eyes happened to meet those of a guild employee, and I looked away again. It was a little, you know, awkward.

"Now, Kazuma, that's enough. You're such a capable spitter of abuse that any girl would cry if you really turned your gripes on her," Megumin said.

"She's right. If you have any complaints, level them at me! Pour out your invective upon me!" said Darkness, in fine form.

I let them convince me to let up. The Axel Hearts were obviously really sorry for what they had done. Maybe I could let it go at this.

After all, it only *looked* like I'd donated the entire sum. I'd held a nice little nest egg back. Now I'd whined and moaned enough that everyone would believe I'd really given it all away. Even Aqua and the others didn't know about my new secret stash. It wouldn't be enough to fund my intended entire lifetime of taking it easy, but I wouldn't have to do much of anything for a while.

"Siiiiigh, *fine*. At least I was able to pay off my debts. I'll have to be happy with—"

"Hey, aren't you forgetting something?" came Chris's voice from behind me.

"Kazuma, you gotta tell us if you change the venue!" said Dust, who was with her. "I told the waitress that she could apologize by letting me touch her butt, and I got the police called on me!"

The two of them were joined by Wiz, Rin, Cecily, Arue, and Yunyun—everyone who'd been part of the fight against Daniel was here for a little celebration.

"Cool, you're all here. It's...not lavish, I guess, but I've at least got enough cash left for a bit of a party. Grab a drink, have some food."

"Whoo-hoo! Free food and booze! I'm gonna stuff myself enough for a week!" Dust said, lunging at the edibles.

"Please stop. You're embarrassing me," said Rin.

“For once, maybe I’ll eat something other than gelatinous slime. Say, we can get doggy bags for this, right? Whatever you’re having, hand it over!”

“Not happenin’, sister. Debt collectors have been on my tail for two days, and I haven’t had a bite to eat!” said Dust.

“I’m just as hungry as you are! I haven’t eaten since I bilked that Eris food handout yesterday!”

The two of them started struggling over a hunk of bone-in meat. It was turning ugly, and I decided the best thing I could do was ignore them.

“Wow... So this is a party! I’ve wanted to go to one for so long!”

“Yunyun, it’s not something to cry tears of joy over,” Arue said, sighing. Her friend was completely overcome by the occasion.

“You know, I like this. It’s a nice chance to relax,” Chris said. She was the only one who looked like she was keeping an even keel and just enjoying herself.

“Yeah, well, it’s my treat, so don’t hold back,” I said.

“Now, that’s generosity! Hey, speaking of which, let’s talk money! I still haven’t gotten my reward yet,” Dust boomed out. Everyone gathered around him.

Oh yeah! I had to pay everyone their rewards...

W-wait a second!

“Hey, you didn’t *forget*, did you?” Dust said.

“You’re not going to try to pass this off as, like, you’re so bottom of the heap that you forget you have to pay people for their work, are you?” Rin said.

“That’s right, Kazuma! Vanir said something about still not having gotten the money for that merchandise. He said some very scary things to me about *knowing what happens when you renege on a contract with a devil*.”

Dust and Wiz closed in on me, Wiz puffing out her cheeks angrily.

Shit! I completely forgot I’d told Vanir I would pay the production costs on the merch later on!

“Ahhh, crap! Yes! Of course I’m going to pay you! Waitress, bring plenty of bubbly!”

I’d finally paid off my debts, and now I wasn’t going to have anything left for myself at all?!

“In that case, let me do my most special party trick!”

“And I will light up the night sky with my explosion!”

“N-no, wait, Megumin! My dad will be really upset with you if you cause any more trouble inside Axel city limits!”

Around me, my party members were celebrating and drinking, just like they always did. Everyone else was adding to the commotion—and subtracting from my income. The Axel Hearts were doing a

song and dance, Aqua was performing her tricks, and Megumin was being forcibly restrained as she started chanting, much to Darkness's jealousy.

Sigh. Another wonderful evening in Axel. Dammit!

Afterword

Hey, everyone, it's been a while! Or maybe, it's nice to meet you? I'm not sure which it is for you, so let me briefly introduce myself. I'm the author of a previous *Konosuba* spin-off, *This Idiot Wants His Moment in the Limelight, Too!* That's one reason I was asked to come back and do the *Fantastic Days* novel.

But enough about me. This book is based on the story of the first part of the *Fantastic Days* game. My challenge was to remain faithful to the spirit of the game while infusing the book with the appropriate *Konosuba*-ness.

I thought that since the story was already finished—it's in the game, after all—this would be easy. I wish I could go back and slap my naive self in the face! It was absolutely arduous. Part One has a ton of dialogue, for one thing, more than you could normally fit into a regular novel. I agonized over which conversations to cut and which to build on and expand. But I was consoled by the joy of being able to once again write all the wonderful characters who populate *Konosuba*!

The three members of the Axel Hearts are new characters original to the game. Lia, Erika, and Cielo: Their personalities and achievements are something to behold.

I have to admit, though, that I never expected to be involved with *Konosuba* in quite this way—writing a novel version of a game.

I must give thanks for this wonderful good fortune!

Natsume Akatsuki: I owe it all to you, as usual! Thank you for continuing to trust me with your world post-*Limelight*. And please look after your health in these trying times!

Kurone Mishima: What an honor to have you handling the illustrations! It's a joy, not just as an author, but as a *Konosuba* fan.

To everyone at Sumzap, who created the game: Thank you for producing such an enjoyable experience! I was surprised Dust gets such a large role—it had me grinning like an idiot.

Finally, to the Sneaker Editorial Division, my editor, and everyone else who was involved in getting this novel to print—thank you all very, very much!

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